

Allakaket Airlines
Book III
In the
North to Alaska Series
by Fleataxi
Chapter 1 - New Kid in Town

Ron moved Anne into Jim's house, and moved into his new house on the hill. It was huge, cold, and lonely. The wood walls were over a foot thick, and the huge garage housed 2 pickups, including a brand new Ford F-350 4x4 turbodiesel, the older diesel truck, a snowmobile, and a used diesel Kubota L-48 4wd tractor with a front bucket and a backhoe. Even with all the new toys, he still had money left from the half-million his dad gave him. Bill Ayer called and asked him if he'd like to spend a week with him in Hawaii. It was the dead of winter, and Ron thought that a trip to a warmer climate would improve his mood, so he accepted. Ron drove his truck to the airfield, pulled the TurboGoose out of the hangar, preflighted it, then pulled the truck into a parking spot next to the hangar, and took his bags out of the cab. He jumped into the pilot's seat, and finished the pre-flight, called the tower for permission to take off, and programmed the nav computer with the coordinates for Anchorage Alaska. Bill had told him to park in Alaska Airlines VIP lot, and he would be waiting with a Gulfstream II to fly to Hawaii. When he parked the TG, there was a Gulfstream II parked right next to him, and Bill was already in the pilot's seat. He grabbed his gear, and locked the plane. After he tossed his bags into the Gulfstream, he walked forward; Bill motioned him to the co-pilot's seat. "Bill, I'm not qualified to fly this plane!"

"You're not flying it, I am, besides, with your ATP you're more than qualified to fly right seat. The company has a condo on Kauai, and I've booked it for a week."

"Are there any dive shops around there?"

"Why?"

"I'm a PADI certified Open Water diver, and you wouldn't believe how beautiful this world is underwater."

"Wanna Bet? I've had my Open Water cert for almost 10 years, looks like we're going diving!"

"Great, let's get this show on the road!"

Bill finished preflighting the Gulf Stream, taxied toward the runway, and got permission to take off, then he turned southwest toward Hawaii. He didn't fly straight to Hawaii, but flew the Northern west-bound corridor, which added 100 miles to their trip, but reduced the chance of a

mid-air collision, since all the planes in the corridor were flying west. They landed at the private airstrip on Kauai later that afternoon, checked into the condo, which Ron was glad to see was a 2-bedroom suite, and dumped their suitcases and changed into their shorts. Not thinking, Ron had packed his SEAL shorts. Bill picked up on that immediately, and asked him how he got a pair of official SEAL swim trunks. Ron related his experiences with Bear at MacDill. Bill was impressed to say the least, because he had several SEAL friends, and they never told him to call them by their Team names, and these guys were really good friends! Bill picked up the Yellow pages, and quickly located a dive shop that could rent them not only the diving equipment, but a chartered dive boat for as long as they wanted it. Bill asked Ron what kind of wetsuit he wanted, and Ron told him a Men's medium 4/3 suit. Bill ordered the suits, and 2 sets of tanks/regulators, etc. He rented cameras, lights and everything else they would need. The condo came with limousine service, and he called the front desk to reserve the limousine for first thing tomorrow morning to take them to the dive shop. They spent the rest of the afternoon goofing off pool side, then went inside for dinner. Bill liked this condo complex, because everything was informal. He liked the change from always having to wear a suit.

The next morning, they rode in the limousine to the dive shop. Bill handed them his Alaska Airlines AMEX card, and signed the receipt. They showed their PADI dive cards, then were escorted to the boat, which was fueled and all ready to go. Since Bill knew all the hot dive spots in Kauai, he checked the GPS navigation system, and selected several sites they wanted to visit. Ron checked out the boat, and saw it was equipped for live aboard, and wondered why they got the condo. Ron thought he had seen beautiful reefs in Florida, but the reefs they dove over the next couple of days made them look like an aquarium. Ron shot dozens of rolls of film, as did Bill. They became even closer friends over the trip. On the way back home to Alaska, Ron asked Bill why he never married. Bill said he was married, but his wife ran out on him years ago, and he never got over it. He found out later that she had multiple affairs while they were married, and she had married him for his money. Since she had abandoned him and left the state, he was granted an uncontested divorce by the courts, and an annulment by the church, but never found anyone who would love him for him. He told Ron to pick his future wife carefully. Ron told him about the incident with the barracuda, and Bill laughed his head off then said "I would have paid big money to see the look on her face when you said that - I'll have to remember that one! I'll bet the rest of the barracudas will leave you alone from now on!"

"I hope so Bill, my dad died recently, and I built a huge house on the hill above Allakaket, but without a wife and children, it's a big empty museum."

"Don't be in too big a rush to get married Ron, you might make the same mistake I did."

Ron told him the story about Samantha, and what she was doing now.

"Ron, I don't know if I would have exhibited the self-control you did. You really were a friend to her. You gave her exactly what she needed with no thought of receiving anything in return."

She's saved now, and going to become an ER doc. You could have done worse."

"Bill, it really killed me to let her go, I still miss her, and I'm still tempted to fly to North Carolina and ask her to marry me."

"Don't, you'll regret it. Even if she agrees, it will be all wrong, and odds are now that she's into Medical School, she's there to stay. If she says "No", you'll really be hurt."

"You're right, but I'm so lonely I could cry!"

"Believe me Ron, I know how you feel."

"I've got an idea. Let's double date so we can get two opinions on our dates. I'll keep you from getting trapped by a phony, and you can do the same for me!"

"That's brilliant Ron. The main reason I didn't date is I was so lousy at evaluating women I was dating, but with a neutral 3rd party there, it would work, also that way the women wouldn't feel so vulnerable and defensive like they do when they think some rich guy is trying to come on to them."

"Bill, I've got the entire winter with almost nothing to do. Why don't I rent an apartment in Anchorage for the winter, and we can start on that list you gave me.

"I've got an ever better idea. I've got a huge 4 bedroom house in Anchorage that feels like that house of yours in Allakaket. We could entertain there, or take them out to dinner, and that way I'd have a roommate, someone to talk to, and you could live in a nice place rent-free and it would be so much more convenient for me instead of sending the limo for you first, then getting our dates."

"Great, I can move enough stuff to stay the winter."

"Make sure you bring your guns!"

They landed in Anchorage a couple of hours later, and Ron flew back to Allakaket, told Bill he was spending the winter in Anchorage, and left Bill Ayer's number in case he needed to get in touch with him, and said that the other Goose pilot could fly any deliveries or emergencies that they needed over the winter. He went to his house, packed his guns and ammo, and enough clothes so he didn't need to wash more than once a week, and drove back to the plane, loaded it up, and taxied back to the lake and took off for Anchorage. Once he was airborne, he called Bill's office on his sat phone, and gave him his ETA.

When he landed, he taxied to his space at Alaska Airlines private aircraft parking area, shut down the plane, and was met by a guy with a truck and a note from Bill to put his stuff in the

truck, and he would meet him at his house. The driver knew where it was and could be trusted. The driver introduced himself as Sam, and was the Baggage Handling supervisor for Alaska Airlines. Ron thought Sam was big enough to pick up a 747 by himself. He handled the rifles and ammo cases gently, but you could tell that they were no strain on him at all. Finally when everything was loaded, Sam got in the driver's seat, and Ron got in the passenger seat. Ron was still wearing his shoulder holster, and he could tell it was making Sam nervous, but he didn't know Sam from Adam, and he had almost \$50 thousand dollars worth of firearms in the back, and had no intention of taking off his holster. Sam didn't say two words to Ron on the drive over. They drove through downtown Anchorage to the westernmost end. Bill's house was a magnificent house on a bluff overlooking the Inland Sea surrounded by trees. It had huge picture windows to take advantage of the view. Bill greeted Ron as he drove up the drive, and Sam put Ron's bags in his room. Bill gave him the grand tour. Bill's house was huge, and definitely designed for entertaining. It had a huge floor to ceiling rear-projection screen with surround sound stereo system and a popcorn maker. Downstairs was a game room with a pool table, and a 10-person Jacuzzi/hot tub on the rear deck inside a screened gazebo. The kitchen looked like it came from a set of a cooking show, and the bathrooms were opulent with lavish fixtures, Jacuzzi tubs, and huge walk-in showers. Bill showed Ron his room, and it was on the opposite side of the house, with a separate entrance so Ron could come and go as he pleased without waking Bill. Bill handed Ron a set of keys and an alarm transmitter. Bill looked kind of funny at Ron, and asked him what in blazes he was doing wearing a double shoulder holster in Anchorage, it wasn't the Wild West anymore.

Ron explained that he always wore the shoulder holster and fanny pack when he flew, and explained why. Bill agreed that it was a good idea while flying, but portrayed the wrong image in Anchorage. Bill had an oversized soft-sided briefcase he could put them in if he wanted to carry them around. Ron decided to hang his holster in his bedroom closet, and switched to his P-14 Limited in the Bladetech IWB holster with the dual mag carrier. Ron was still armed, but Bill didn't know it - out of sight, out of mind. They spent the rest of the day getting organized, then tomorrow was Sunday, and they had a social scheduled after church the 3rd Sunday of each month.

The next day, they drove to church in the limo, and Ron was amazed when none of the Barracudas gave him a second glance. After church, Bill introduced him around, and he met some really nice girls ranging from about 18-23 years old. Most of them worked in Anchorage at various entry level jobs. One of them was a junior programmer, one was a veterinary assistant, and the rest were various types of clerks trying to climb the corporate ladder. Ron made a short list of the women he was interested in, compared notes with Bill, then they went back and invited the most interesting prospects to dinner that night at Bill's place. They felt much better when they learned it was a double date, and they would be picked up by Bill's limo driver. Bill suggested they dress conservatively casual, and that dinner would be at 7:00pm. Ron found out later that Bill was a gourmet chef that loved Italian food. He made 3 different types of pasta, a vegetable dish, and even had time to make homemade Spumoni.

Their dates arrived promptly at 6:30, and Bill thought they were dressed appropriately. They were both wearing long skirts and blouses in different pastel shades. Ron's date was Nancy, a 20-yr old veterinary assistant, and Bill's date was Sue, the 35 year old programmer. Over dinner, they talked and had a good time. At 10:00, Bill cut the evening short since he had to be at work at 0800 the next morning, and had the driver drive them both home. After the girls left, Ron and Bill compared notes. They both liked Nancy, but Sue seemed to be severely uptight. Ron decided that Nancy would get a second date later after the first round was completed. The next several weeks, they double-dated at least once a week. When they were finished, Ron found 6 girls he'd like to ask out again, and Bill had 3 since he was pickier. Ron noticed he had picked mostly blondes, and Bill had a redhead and 2 brunettes. All of Bill's picks were divorcees, so there would be some additional baggage involved. All of Ron's picks were single never-married girls. Over the course of the winter, Ron started dating just 2 girls, then just one. It seemed Nancy and him really hit it off. Bill had struck out, but had found some new friends, so when he wanted to do stuff, they wanted to go with him as friends. That would come in handy at business dinners, since showing up stag was seriously embarrassing.

Ron and Nancy were spending more and more time together, and sat together at church. Nancy was a city girl that loved animals, had originally lived in Wisconsin and learned to hunt white tail deer there, but got grossed out at the process of skinning to the point that her dad often skinned her deer. She liked camping but had never lived outside of a city. Finally Ron took her to Allakaket to meet Anne. Anne approved of her, but Nancy was a little skittish about moving into the "middle of nowhere."

Anne explained to her that until she met Roy, Ron's dad, she lived in Dallas and was a big-city nurse. She moved to Allakaket to help her brother out when he got assigned there as a doctor, and met Roy when a tree fell on him and broke his arm. Her bother wanted to join the Air Force, so he fixed her up with Roy as a private duty nurse, and they fell in love and were married. She spent the next 17 years living in a 2-room cabin that made Allakaket look like Anchorage. She said something very important "Home is where your heart is, I was in love with Roy, and Roy lived in a cabin, so my home is back in that cabin in the woods."

Nancy said "How Romantic!" Ron asked her if she'd like to see the cabin, it was another hour's flight. She said yes in a heartbeat, and they boarded the TG after Ron kissed his mother goodbye. An hour later, he landed at the lake, and taxied up onto the beach, then they walked to the cabin hand in hand. Ron unlocked the door and they went inside. Nancy's first comment was "It's so small", to which Ron replied "More like cozy and comfortable. In the deep woods like here, you heat everything with wood, so you don't build big houses."

Nancy said "You're not planning on living here are you?"

"No, I've got a house in Allakaket, do you want to see it?"

Nancy said yes, and they walked outside. Ron locked the door and they walked back to the

plane. They landed in Allakaket an hour later, and Ron took the older truck. They drove for miles until they came to the end of a road. "It's right up that road Nancy."

They got out and walked. Nancy was sure it would be another log cabin until she stepped into the clearing and saw the huge house made of logs, like a dream come true. "I could live here."

"That was the general idea. Want a tour?"

They walked throughout the whole house, and Nancy knew she could live here. There weren't any malls, shopping, or anything in Allakaket, but Anchorage was just over an hour away by air. "Ron, how many kids did you want?"

"I've got a 4-bedroom house, so how about 4 kids?"

"I always wanted a large family, and 4 kids sounds just about right."

"Did you want to home school them, there are no schools in Allakaket."

"Actually the way the schools are now, I'd prefer to home school the kids."

"Nancy, I already know you like hunting and fishing, but could you give up a social life, live in a small town and raise your kids?"

"Depends on the father."

"Ok, how about a father that was home every night, and loved you to pieces, was great with the kids, and helped around the house, and most of all, was a God-fearing Christian Man?"

"Where do I sign up?"

"How about right here?"

Nancy realized she had been neatly set up. Ron was barely 18, but a very mature 18. He wouldn't have any problems supporting the kids, and he really was in love with her. She wasn't sure how she felt about Ron. She thought that if he could meet her mom, that would give her an idea.

"Ron, before I answer that question, I want you to meet my mom, she's a real good judge of character, after all she married my Dad."

"What happened to your dad?"

"He died recently just like yours."

“Where does your mom live?”

“She lives in Seward with her sister.”

Ok, the TurboGoose has enough range for that. I’ll have to gas up. Do you think your mom would mind us dropping in?”

“This is all a little sudden, don’t you think?”

“Well, you met my mom, I think the least I can do is meet yours, and I’ve got the time.”

“Well if you put it that away, let’s go!”

They got into the plane, and Ron taxied to the fuel pumps and filled the tanks as full as he could, then made sure everything was secure. Nancy liked riding in the copilot’s seat. She’d like to have her pilot’s license one day, but never told anyone, since they were too expensive to get.

Ron found Seward in his navigation software, and was glad to note they had a fuel depot with JP-5. He contacted the tower and received permission to take off, then headed south to Seward. It took 4 hours at 250 knots, then he called the tower, and landed the plane at the municipal airport. Seward was almost as big as Anchorage, he was glad to note. They called Nancy’s mom, and drove over to her place. Since it was near dinner, she invited them to stay for dinner. Since Ron was IFR qualified, he was OK flying home after dark. They took a cab to Nancy’s mom’s house, and were met by a little old lady that Nancy immediately hugged and called Mom. When they broke their clinch, Ron stuck his hand out and said “Mrs. Henderson, I’m Ron Williams.”

“My, my such nice manners. I was always hoping Nancy would meet a nice boy like you.”

“May we come in?”

“Why yes, where are my manners, come on in.”

Their house was small but cozy, and there was one cat in the living room, sitting on her sister Ester’s lap. Ron walked over and introduced himself, then asked if he could pet her cat.

“Yes of course, Old Thomasina loves company.”

The cat was so mellow Ron could swear it was on Thorazine, but it seemed to enjoy Ron petting it. He remembered petting Lucky and quickly withdrew, shaking his head.

“What’s wrong Ron?”

“I just miss my dog Lucky.”

“I know how you feel, when I’m working with the vet, and they have to put an animal down, I start crying too.”

Nancy’s mother noted approvingly that Ron seemed to have a soft heart.

“So where did you two meet?”

“Mrs. Henderson, we go to the same church.”

“Ron, please my name is Gertrude.”

“Thanks Gertrude. Don at the FAA office invited me to his church the Sunday after I went to the Christian Businessman’s Prayer Breakfast on Saturday with Bill Ayer.”

“You know William Ayer?”

“Yes Ma’am.”

“Mom, Ron’s being modest, he owns Allakaket Airlines. We flew one of his planes down here from Allakaket.”

“Ron, you live in Allakaket?”

“Yes Ma’am, I was born just 100 miles north of there in a small log cabin, and lived there all my life.”

“Sounds exciting. I wish Sam would have settled in the interior instead of Seward.”

“Gertrude, you know he got a job here, otherwise he would have.”

“Right Ester.”

Gertrude looked at her watch and said “I believe Dinner is ready.”

“Do you need any help serving dinner or setting the table?”

“You can set the table if you want Ron.”

Gertrude was really impressed by Ron so far. Maybe Nancy found someone that she could settle down with.

Ron set the table, then Gertrude said grace. Ron bowed his head and said “Amen” at the end. Gertrude had made stew for dinner. Ron thought it was delicious, and it was. They talked for a while, then Gertrude turned to Nancy and said, “It’s getting late, are you OK getting home after dark.”

“Mom, Ron owns a big Grumman Goose with a full modern instrument suite. He’s got his Airline Transport Pilot’s license, so he’s fully qualified to fly at night.”

“OK, anyway you kids better get going.”

“Mrs. Henderson, thanks for a lovely dinner, and I hope to see you again.”

Ron turned to leave and Gertrude whispered to Nancy “This one’s a keeper, better get married before someone else grabs him.”

“Thanks Mom, I needed to hear that from you.”

Nancy kissed her mom on the cheek, and said “Bye Mom. See you later.”

Just as they were walking out the door, the cab they had called showed up. He drove them back to the airport, except this time Nancy was much more cuddly. Ron paid the cab at the airport, and they walked hand in hand to his airplane. They taxied to the fuel depot where he filled the tanks up, then turned toward the runway. He set the nav computer up for Allakaket, and set the cockpit lights so he could see the instruments, since he would need them to fly tonight. It was already dark and getting darker by the time they took off.

Ron concentrated on his flying until they were at cruising altitude, and could engage the autopilot.

“Nancy, I was really glad I got to meet your mother today, she’s a really nice lady.”

“Ron, is that offer still open?”

“Nancy, Are you sure you are OK with living in Allakaket? It’s pretty remote, especially during the winter. The upside is fishing, hunting, camping, and hiking during the summer and fall, and cross-country skiing or snowmobiling during the winter. If we want to socialize, I have a 4x4 diesel truck we can drive to the café, or we can take snowmobiles if the weather’s not too bad.”

“Ron, remember what your mom said about home is where the heart is?”

“Yes!”

“Well I can tell you where my heart is, it’s with you. I wasn’t sure at first, but my mom cinched it. I’m a lousy judge of character, and I’ve been burned before, but my mom can smell either a Rat or 24-carat gold from a mile away, and she thinks you’re 24-carat gold. I really liked you from the start, but I’ve been suckered by some jerks before, so I’m very careful about giving my heart away.”

“Nancy, will you marry me?”

“What took you so long to ask?”

Nancy gave Ron a kiss that made Samantha look like an amateur, then Ron said “Holding out on me? I didn’t know you were such a good kisser?”

“Well you do now Ron.”

“Are you OK with long engagements?”

“6 weeks too long?”

“Depends on how many times I see you in that six weeks Nancy. How would you like to learn to fly?”

“I’d love to, but I could never afford to.”

“Until we start having kids, the best way to spend the most time with me would be as my co-pilot. If you were fully certified, we could fly longer routes that necessitated IFR flying like now. If you were a paying passenger, I’d technically need a co-pilot since darkness is usually an IFR condition unless the moon is so bright you can see well enough to navigate by it.”

“Great, when do I start?”

“As soon as you want to.”

Ron reached for his sat phone and dialed Bill Ayer. “Bill, I hope I didn’t wake you, but guess what? Nancy and I are getting married!”

“Terrific, when’s the wedding?”

“Nancy said 6 weeks if we can wait that long - she’s a good kisser!”

Nancy gave him another kiss - just for luck.

“Bill, we’re going to stay overnight in Allakaket so we can give my mom the good news.”

“Ok, it will take me that long to arrange the Engagement party at my place tomorrow. Dress is formal, so wear your suit!”

“Yes sir! Nancy, do you own a suit?”

“Just my swimsuit!”

“I don’t think that’s what he had in mind.”

Bill was listening to the whole conversation, and started laughing. “Ron, you wear a suit, Nancy can wear a dress! NOT the other way around, this isn’t San Francisco!”

“OK Bill see you tomorrow!”

“I can’t believe it; I’ve finally found Mrs. Right!”

“I thought your last name was Williams?”

Chapter 2 - Engagement

Ron and Nancy landed at Allakaket around 10:00 pm, and were met by a very tired mayor, who gave them separate rooms for the night at the newly remodeled inn. The next morning, they drove over to see Ron's mom, who was so happy she was crying. Nancy received enough hugs to last a week. Anne said "I wish your dad was here to see this!"

"He is Mom - I'm sure he's grinning from ear to ear from his perch near St. Peter saying "That's my Boy!"

Anne gave Ron a big hug and told him to take care of Nancy. Ron said they lived just a couple of miles away, and could be there if she needed them, and Bill was just a phone call away.

"Don't you worry about me, I'll be just fine!"

They got back in Ron's truck, drove up to his house, and Ron brought out several large Pelican cases and some big green boxes. Then he packed a couple of bags for each of them, turned off the lights and locked the door.

"Ron, what's in the cases?"

"They're a surprise. I promised Bill we could go long-distance shooting some time, and now seemed to be the best time, since we're going to be busy planning a wedding, and getting you your pilot's license. We also need to stop by a jewelry store on our way to Bill's. It's not really an engagement party unless you can show off your engagement ring."

"Ron, I don't want a huge rock, so don't buy me anything bigger than a ½ carat please!"

"Your wish is my command!"

"Just remember that when the sink is full of dirty dishes, and both kids need their diapers changed!"

"Yes Dear!" <Like Father Like Son!>

When they reached the TurboGoose, Ron lugged the cases into the passenger compartment of the plane, then he opened the door for Nancy and she sat in the co-pilot's seat as he ran around and got in the pilot's seat. He started the Allison turbines and taxied to the fuel pumps, and filled the tanks with JP-5. He sealed the caps, did a quick walk-around, and climbed back in to do the pre-flight checks. Once everything was ready to go, he moved the throttles from idle and the propellers engaged and he taxied out to the lake. Once they were fully waterborne, he retracted the landing gear, and set the plane up for take off while programming the nav system

for Anchorage. After receiving permission to take off, they were airborne and flying to Anchorage at 250 knots. Once they reached cruising altitude, he set the autopilot and gave Nancy a big kiss.

“What’s that for?”

“For saying you’ll marry me!”

“Well in that case...”

Ron was glad that he learned to hold his breath; otherwise he might have passed out from that kiss. They flew along in prenuptial bliss as the plane winged its way to Anchorage. When they were 10 minutes out, they called Anchorage for landing instructions, and were told to park the plane in Alaska Airline’s VIP section. Wondering what Bill had up his sleeve besides his arm, Ron taxied to the VIP ramp only to see Bill’s limo waiting for them. When they got out, the driver handed Ron a note.

Ron, the limo is yours to use today, I’m sure you have some shopping to do. I took the day off to plan and cook for all the people I invited. Buy Nancy a beautiful dress on my card.

Bill

Ron was holding Bill’s Alaska Airlines AMEX card.

The driver wished he would have gotten one of the baggage handlers to help load these cases into the limousine. They barely fit in the trunk, and he had worked up a pretty good sweat by the time he was finished loading the limousine. He asked Ron “Where to Sir?”

“Take us to the best jeweler in town, then we need to buy Nancy a fancy dress for the party tonight.”

“Yes sir.”

He opened the doors and they got in, giggling like school kids. There was a bottle of sparkling cider in an ice bucket with 2 glasses in the limousine.

Nancy saw it and told Ron “Open it.” So he opened the sun roof and pried the top off the bottle. Good thing he opened the sun roof, because the cork went flying, and he poured 2 glasses. Before they drank, Ron proposed a toast “To Love!”

Nancy’s smile could have lit up the Boston Gardens all by itself.

15 minutes later, the limousine stopped in front of a fancy jeweler’s store. The driver got out,

and held the door open for them. The owners of the store recognized the plate number, and were bowing and scraping and fawning all over them. Ron said they were looking for a half carat engagement ring for his fiancé. She was shown several trays of half carat diamonds, and decided the marquise cut was the most flattering for her long thin fingers. She also preferred white gold to yellow gold. They showed her a dozen unmounted stones with their GIA certified ratings. Ron saw one that he knew she would love, it was a D color VVS1 stone that just looked like lasers were coming out of it. The owner liked Ron's taste, and suggested a low-mount ring so she wouldn't snag it on things. Ron liked the design elements, and Nancy liked the way the stone gleamed in the mount. Ron asked them if they could put a rush on it, they were due at Bill Ayer's house that afternoon for their engagement party. The jeweler assured them it would be mounted, polished, and sized within 2 hours. He slid a set of trial rings down her ring finger until he found a perfect fit, then wrote the number on the work order. Ron handed him his Allakaket Airlines AMEX card, and the owner was back two minutes later with a sales receipt for Ron to sign. He handed Ron a claim check, and wrote RUSH on the order, and a due by time of 2 hours later. Ron hoped it wouldn't take 2 hours to shop for a dress. He hoped Nancy was a more decisive shopper than Samantha.

They walked outside, and the driver was waiting with the door open, when he closed the door, he drove to the most exclusive boutique in Anchorage. Ron was glad that Bill had volunteered to pay for the dress, because some of these dresses cost more than Nancy's diamond. Finally after an hour and a half, Nancy asked Ron to come into the dressing room to see if he approved. She was wearing a baby blue dress with a non-existent neckline. Nancy looked stunning in it, and he realized that the dress was more modest than most of the swimsuits he had seen on the beach in Hawaii. Nancy was worried that the dress was designed to be worn braless, and she hadn't gone braless since she was 12. Ron assured her she looked stunning in the dress, and it wasn't too revealing as long as she didn't bend over too far. Nancy had to laugh at that image, then made Ron swear that if she dropped anything while wearing that dress, he'd pick it up for her. Ron held her and gave her a big kiss, and told her she was the most beautiful woman in the world. That kind of praise can earn multiple brownie points, so she told Ron to amscray so she could get dressed, since they weren't married yet! Ron made a hasty retreat, and when he looked back, Nancy blew him a kiss, and told him to wait up front for her. The dress was easier to get out of than into, and she also had to buy a special pair of panties to avoid any lines. She decided that she could dress like that for just one night, then back to her conservative mode of dress. The clerk picked out a pair of shoes that shaped and accentuated her calves. The clerk warned her not to walk very far in those shoes if she weren't used to heels, or she'd get a Charlie horse. The clerk bagged her purchases, and hung the dress on a special hanger to keep it wrinkle free. She told Nancy that the dress was OK to wear tonight, and it should only be dry cleaned after that. Nancy knew she would never wear that dress again in her lifetime.

She came out of the changing rooms back in her regular clothes just in time to make it to the jewelers. They paid for her purchases, and the Driver got them back to the jewelers within 2 hours and 5 minutes. The jeweler had a surprise for them. Bill Ayer had called them, and asked the jeweler to loan them a 1 carat Diamond pendant that matched the ring. The dealer made

Ron put a credit card deposit for the value of the diamond, with a 24-hour return. When he saw how much the diamond pendant was, he decided to make darn sure that they were back at the jewelers first thing tomorrow to return it. He handed them the pendant in a leather covered satin-lined box. Then he gave Ron Nancy's ring, and he slipped it onto her hand. She gave him a big kiss, then they had to get to Bill's house. The driver had called ahead, and got one of the strongest of Bill's employees to meet them at Bill's house to unload the trunk. Bill met Ron and Nancy in the drive and said "Congratulations you two. Ron, put your stuff in your old room, Nancy can take the room between us. You're both staying the night tonight."

"Bill, I have a little surprise in the trunk for you."

He looked past Ron to his employee taking the huge Pelican cases out of the trunk, and he knew what they were. He was glad he had his secretary clear his schedule for the rest of the week.

"Bill, let's go shooting at Elmendorf right after we return Nancy's pendant. Here's your credit card back, and thanks."

"Don't mention it. Nancy is a beautiful woman, and she deserves to look like a princess tonight."

"Bill, I hope you didn't invite the pastor, Nancy's dress is kind of revealing, but no worse than anything we saw at the beach."

"He'll be there, but he's been to formal events before, and is used to women with braless dresses, since that's the only kind of formal dress they make anymore for anyone under 60 years old. OK you two, I need some help in the kitchen, then we all need to take showers and get changed, the guests will start arriving in 3 hours."

Nancy said "Aren't you cutting it a little close, I'm going to need at least 2 hours to put on the warpaint and feathers."

"We'll let you start early then."

They adjourned to the kitchen where Bill was whipping up tons of appetizers and finger foods. In another hour the servers would arrive and start setting up the house for a large party. Large was an understatement in this case, more like huge. Anyone who was anyone in Anchorage Society was invited to the engagement party. He needed 6 valets just to park all the vehicles, and all the limousines in Anchorage were booked. When the servers arrived, Bill dismissed Nancy and Ron to get ready. Ron's suit was hanging on a Dry Clean hanger. Evidently Bill had sent Ron's suit out to be cleaned while they were out. He got undressed and got in the shower, then shaved and got dressed. When he went to get dressed, he noticed that his shoes had been freshly polished. He walked out to the main room with 15 minutes to spare. Nancy was no where to be found, and Ron knew she just wanted to make an appearance. 15 minutes

later, she made an appearance, and Bill and Ron just stood there with their mouths open. Nancy looked like a Hollywood movie star with her flowing, shimmering long blond hair, the 1 carat marquise diamond pendant glowing between her breasts, and a matching set of diamond earrings in her ears. It turned out that she had a pair of cubic zirconia ear rings, but no one knew from looking, since the pendant was obviously real, as was the diamond engagement ring. Ron whispered something in her ear and she giggled. 10 minutes later the doorbell rang and the guests started arriving. An hour later, they were still arriving, and the room was getting crowded, so Bill opened the balcony doors and expanded the room by 50%. Everyone was admiring Nancy's ring and pendant, and saying what a lovely couple they were. Nancy made sure she didn't bend any further forward than she had to all night. By the time the last guest left at midnight, they were exhausted. Ron and Nancy went out on the balcony for some private time.

"Ron, I love you so much, thanks for doing this for me, but I hope I never have another night like this as long as I live. Half the men were staring at my breasts instead of my face, and most of the women were so catty that I thought they had claws. I could never live in this society lifestyle, it's so phony."

"Glad you feel that way. Hanging with Bill has been an education in more ways than one, and I agree I want no part of this scene. We'll shop in Anchorage when we need to, and I'll fly out for meetings with Bill, but I'm not going to do the social circuit, even if it costs me business." Ron gave his future wife a big kiss, then noticed something.

"Are you wearing underwear?"

"All that I could wear with this dress without some embarrassing panty lines was a tiny little thong."

Ron's hands drifted lower, and he said "I see what you mean!"

"Ron if you don't move your hands, we might not make it to our wedding date!"

He slid his hands reluctantly back up to her waist.

"Ron, let's get married in Allakaket, otherwise Bill's going to invite all his friends. I'd rather have a small wedding in the Allakaket chapel than a huge wedding in Anchorage."

Ron gave her a big kiss and said "I was hoping you'd feel that way, I wasn't looking forward to the circus that a big Anchorage wedding would become."

With that out of the way, Ron went to bed, but first he took a cold shower.

The next morning they returned the 1-carat diamond pendant, and made sure they got the

receipt, then they called the gunny at Elmendorf and made sure it was OK to shoot today. He said he would meet them at the gate. Ron said to watch for a limousine.

1 hour later, the gate guards were amazed when a stretch limousine pulled up to the gate. They were even more amazed when the gunny told them to wave it through. It parked in the Security parking lot, and 2 Air Force Police loaded the contents of the trunk into Gunny's Hummer. The driver was instructed to wait there, and the rest of the occupants piled like circus clowns into Gunny's hummer and drove onto the base. The gate guards just shook their heads. When they arrived at the firing range, Gunny told Ron that he wasn't expecting an audience. Ron told him that they were his Fiancé and Bill Ayer, the CEO of Alaska Airlines. Gunny thought they would be OK, so he unloaded the Hummer, set the 2 huge rifles on the tables, and had a team of runners (he learned his lesson from the last time - one runner soon becomes a walker) to set up and pull targets on the 1,000 yard line. Gunny handed out eye and ear protection, then they uncased the rifles. Bill was practically drooling, and Nancy was so curious she practically knocked Ron over to see what was in the case. She didn't realize what she was looking at but Bill did.

"Ron, that's not like any Barrett's rifle I've seen in their catalog."

Gunny spoke up. "Folks, these are prototype weapons from Barretts that Ron has been doing an extended Testing and Evaluation program on. The one that looks like its barrel is 3 times the normal size is a new suppressed design. It doesn't totally suppress all firing noise, so we still need eyes and ears when firing it. It comes with a daylight and a night vision scope. Since its broad daylight, obviously we can't use the NV scope, so we will shoot the daylight scope, which is pretty huge itself. The other rifle is an older prototype with the conventional muzzle brake, which was built to test the new daylight scope. The recoil of that weapon is about what you would expect from a 12-gauge shotgun, but the muzzle blast is brutal. You don't want to be within 12 feet of the muzzle brake and to the side if he fires it. Behind is safe. Further behind is even better. These rifles, and especially the new suppressed rifle, are capable of 12" groups at 1,000 yards. They are classified as Secret, so you can't tell anyone you saw or shot these weapons. With that understood, let's get down to shooting."

While Gunny was giving them the security lecture, Ron had set up the suppressed rifle, and was ready to shoot at the 1,000 yard target any time they were ready. Gunny broke out his spotting scope, and set another one up on another table so Bill and Nancy could watch too. Gunny and Ron put on their pair of headsets, and Bill and Nancy put on their hearing protectors.

It took Ron a while to settle down, then he started reciting the 23rd Psalm. That always worked. The crosshairs were locked on the bullseye as if the scope were fixed to a block of concrete. He touched the trigger, and the first round went right through the center of the x-ring. Gunny was silent this time, because Ron had told him that the cheerleading wasn't necessary, and might break him out of the zone. 5 shots later, when Ron had locked the bolt back, Gunny told him that he had probably shot his smallest group yet, and sent a runner to pull the target. He came

back with the target, and the calipers told the story. He had shot a 6 inch group at 1,000 yards. Gunny just shook his head, there were maybe a half-dozen people in the world that could do that. Ron decided to take a breather and let Bill behind the controls. With Ron acting as shooting coach, Bill got in a comfortable prone position, adjusted the stock to fit him, then sighted through the scope. He couldn't believe his eyes. The 1,000 yard target was bright, clear, and appeared to be no more than 20 yards away. When he was ready, Ron switched headsets with Bill, and explained how it worked. Once Bill was ready to go, Ron put on his hearing protectors and retreated back to the spotting scopes. Bill inserted the magazine into the rifle, and cycled the action. Looking through the scope, the target was wobbling slightly, but no more than when he shot that trophy Dahl's Ram in the mountains a few years ago. It was a really long shot for him, 400 yards away with his Remington 7mm Magnum rifle with the Leupold scope. He had shot so much that he could anticipate his wobble, and shoot through it. 5 rounds later, he was amazed that all 5 rounds were inside the bullseye. He wondered how small his group was. 10 minutes later he found out that he had shot a 10-inch group. The gunny had a brilliant idea, and had a tape recorder out when he asked Bill to evaluate the rifle, since Barretts might be interested in the opinions of Civilian Shooters. Ron asked Nancy if she wanted to try it. After Bill reassured her that the recoil was negligible, she said she would love to. Ron acted as the shooting coach again. Nancy wasn't as experienced of a shooter as Bill, but she listened, and did exactly what Ron told her. She got prone behind the rifle, adjusted the stock to fit her, then checked the image through the scope. She was amazed at how bright and clear the image was, she was looking at a target 1,000 yards away, and it looked like the image through the scope at the 100 yard range where her dad taught her to shoot. When she was ready to shoot, Ron handed her a loaded magazine, and retreated to the spotting scopes. She inserted the magazine into the rifle, cycled the action, and said a quick prayer, got behind the scope, and as soon as the image stabilized of the center of the bullseye, she touched the trigger. Ron was amazed when the first round was an X-ring shot through the center of the bullseye, since even Bill didn't get an X-ring shot. When she had fired all 5 rounds, she locked the action open, and stood up. Gunny sent a runner to retrieve the target, and Ron walked up to her "How was that?"

"Ron, you were right, the recoil was about the same as my deer rifle, I can't wait to see the target."

"Nancy, I've got some good news, your first round was right through the x-ring, just like mine."

Gunny measured her target, and was scratching his head, this couldn't be right, an inexperienced deer hunter had out-shot him and Bill. He measured her group at 9 ¾" When Ron saw the number, he picked Nancy up and spun her around in his arms. "You did it, it's amazing, but the calculator doesn't lie, you shot a sub-MOA group from an unfamiliar rifle at 1,000 yards. Gunny made sure he got her impressions of the gun, then they spent the rest of the afternoon shooting, until they were tired. They packed the guns back in their cases, and Gunny drove them back to the limousine. The driver had taken a nap, and when he heard the Hummer next to him, he woke up and opened the doors, then drove them back to Bill's house. They left the guns in the trunk of the limousine, and packed their bags for the trip back to Allakaket. On

the drive to the airport, Nancy turned to Bill and said “I hope you won’t be upset, but I’d rather get married in Allakaket in the chapel, and just have a small service with family and friends. Of course you’re invited.”

Ron looked at Bill and said “I need a best man, would you mind?”

“Ron, I’d be honored.”

“Bill, I’ll call you with the details. Thanks for everything.”

They got out of the limo, and an Alaskan Airlines Baggage handler was waiting to load the heavy cases into their plane. Bill gave Nancy and Ron a hug, and told them to keep in touch, then he got back in the limousine for the short ride to the office. Ron and Nancy bounded up the stairs of their plane, and climbed in the pilot and co-pilot’s seats once Ron had secured the air stairs and the door. Nancy gave Ron a kiss, then he started the turbines, entered the coordinates for Allakaket, and called the tower for permission to take-off. He talked Nancy through what he was doing and why, and she was fascinated. She never knew a big plane like this could be so complicated. Ron received take-off clearance, and taxied to the runway. Minutes later, they were en route to Allakaket. Ron called the tower when they were 15 minutes out, and he made a textbook landing. Before he taxied up the ramp, he made sure to deploy his landing gear, then taxied up to the hangar and shut down. Between the two of them they were able to lug the heavy cases for the rifles into the bed of his pick up, and drove to Ron’s new house. Ron smacked his forehead after they had unloaded the truck “Nancy, I’m assuming you’re renting an apartment in Anchorage.”

“Oh no, I forgot completely about that, I was supposed to be at work today.”

“Nancy, is there any reason you can’t quit and live here with me, I’ve got this huge 4-bedroom house, and it’s like living in a museum when I’m here by myself.”

“You’re not saying...”

“Like I said, a 4-bedroom house - pick a bedroom, and we’ll sleep in separate rooms until we’re married. I want our first time together to be our wedding night. My mom and dad managed to keep their hands off each other, and they were living in that small cabin.”

“I like that idea Ron, it gives us time to really get to know each other before we’re married.”

“I guess this means we need to fly back to Anchorage to move your stuff.”

“I’d like to get my stuff, luckily it was a furnished apartment, so the furniture stays.”

“Also we need to see the Mayor, since he’s also the Minister.”

Nancy said, "I'm ready if you are" and they got into the pickup and drove to meet Bill.

"Bill, we're getting married, and would like you to marry us."

"Great, when's the wedding?"

Nancy spoke up, "Ron mentioned 6 weeks, but I don't know if we can wait that long"

"Why's that?"

"Ron slid his hands down below my waist when he kissed me last night and I almost attacked him then and there!"

"Nancy, every engaged couple goes through that, but you need to learn patience. Sometimes you'll want to make love and it's not the right time, like before you're married, or say he had an important meeting the next morning, and he needs his sleep. You shouldn't refuse each other for trivial reasons, but sometimes it's best to wait. If I remember correctly Roy and Anne faced the issue of self-control as well, you might want to talk to Anne about it, and she can give you some pointers. Also, you need to schedule at least 4 marriage counseling sessions with me in the next 6 weeks. Are you ready to set the date yet?"

Nancy said "Bill, let me look at a calendar, what Saturday is 6 weeks from today?"

"That would be May 15th. Ron, is that OK with you?"

"Sure Bill, it's before my busy season so my schedule is pretty open until June or July."

"OK, I'll write that date on my calendar. Ron did you get a best man?"

"Bill Ayer said he'd do it."

"Nancy, anyone that can give you away, or act as a maid of honor?"

"Just my friend from Anchorage. We both worked at the same Veterinary Hospital. I guess this means she's going to have to find a new roommate."

Chapter 3 - Moving day

The next morning they flew to Anchorage to move Nancy's personal stuff. Luckily her roommate let them use her pickup truck, and her stuff was cleaned out of the apartment by that afternoon. The Veterinarian reluctantly accepted her resignation, and gave her a final check that included 2 weeks of unused vacation/sick time, and 2 weeks as severance pay/wedding present. Not that she needed the money, but she used the money to buy some stuff in Anchorage she thought they could use in their new house. She knew they would get a lot of stuff as wedding presents, so she only bought what she would need for 6 weeks. They loaded it all in the TurboGoose, and Ron was glad the TG was much bigger than the DeHaviland, or they might have to leave some of her stuff behind! Ron drove over to the FAA office, and checked into the required training for an ATP co-pilot. Dan gave him a list of requirements, to act as his copilot, the absolute minimum was a Private Pilot's license with Sea, twin, and IFR ratings. He had all the books she needed to study, and she now had the time. While she was studying, he would clear the land behind their house and start a garden. Nancy told him that she loved fresh vegetables, but never had enough room for a garden, except when they lived in Wisconsin. Ron said room would not be a problem, since they owned 100 acres of forest behind them for a total acreage of 110 acres. Nancy asked him why he bought so much land, then he said that they also owned all the wood on the land, and it was cheaper to heat with wood, and between the tractor and a chainsaw, he could cut a lot of lumber in a short period.

When he got home, he realized he needed to buy a new chainsaw, since Roy's saw had seen better days. He called Bill and asked him his suggestions for a new chainsaw. Bill recommended several brands and models while Ron wrote furiously. Next he suggested a dealer to buy them from. Ron was glad he had transferred his DSL service to his new house when he logged on the internet and found exactly what he wanted for even less than the dealer pricing, even after he paid for it to be shipped to Anchorage. He placed the order with his credit card, and left special instructions to contact him via e-mail when it was at the UPS office in Anchorage, since he would go pick it up himself. He received a reply that the price would be \$20.00 less for FOB Anchorage. He could pick it up at the UPS office himself in Anchorage the next time he had to fly there. He also bought some sawhorses, a splitting maul, wedges, sledge hammer to drive the wedge, and a complete set of safety gear. He added a set of log dollies to the list, since he could pull several logs per trip with the tractor.

Later when he was driving around town, he spotted an auxiliary fuel tank that was mounted on a pickup bed for sale, and stopped his truck and knocked on the door. He asked how much they wanted for the tank. They were reluctant to sell, but needed the money since work was scarce. Ron asked him if he could pay him to deliver diesel to his place once a month. He handed the owner a check for the asking price of the tank, and told him that he had just paid their delivery fee for 1 year in advance. The tank held 200 gallons, and Ron owned the town's fuel tanks and the fuel in them, so filling his tanks at home would just be lost profit. Ron asked him to come to the house and get a passkey for the diesel and a receipt book. He explained that the pumps

only worked on a passkey, and this one coded the fuel to his personal use account, he could keep 10 additional gallons of diesel as well as the delivery fee, but his accountant would review the delivery receipts turned in versus the numbers on the pump, and any discrepancy in excess of 15 gallons per delivery would be charged to his account, and if excessive would result in the termination of their contract. Being one of the more honest citizens of Allakaket, he promised Ron that there wouldn't be any discrepancies beyond the 10 gallons allotted for delivery. They shook hands, and the contract was sealed. Later that day Bob, the owner of the tank, showed up and Ron gave him a passkey and a receipt book. Ron said each receipt had to be countersigned by him or Nancy only. Bob checked the level of diesel in Ron's tank, and decided there was enough space to deliver some fuel tomorrow. He delivered 200 gallons, wrote a neat and legible receipt for the fuel, and Ron signed it and kept a copy, and gave Bob a \$5.00 tip. He checked the tank after the delivery and it was full.

Later, Ron received an e-mail that his chainsaw and all the gear he had ordered were in the Anchorage UPS office. He called Bill and asked him if he needed anything delivered to Allakaket, since he needed to go to Anchorage and pick his saw and stuff up at the UPS office. Bill said he had a load that needed to be flown from Anchorage to Allakaket, and he could have his delivery driver pick up the shipment if Ron could e-mail UPS and authorize the delivery company to pick it up. Ron got all the information from Bill, then sent an e-mail to UPS authorizing Bill's delivery service company to pick up his shipment and deliver it to the Anchorage airport.

The next morning Ron flew to Anchorage, and the delivery driver loaded his plane, and he flew back to Allakaket, where someone unloaded the plane and put his packages in the bed of his pickup. He drove back up to his house, and unloaded the packages into his garage. He walked in the front door, and Nancy was sitting there studying. He walked up silently, slipped his arms around her belly, and kissed the nape of her neck until she said, "If you don't stop, I won't be able to either. By the way, I like the way you say "Hi Dear, I'm home!" I'm glad we decided to have 4 kids, because if you keep that up after we're married, I'll have a real problem keeping my hands off you!" Ron was mentally counting the days. He decided that now would be a good time to take the tractor out back and remove some stumps while he had some self-control left. It seemed the more time he spent with Nancy, the more he loved her. One very pleasant surprise came when Nancy cooked dinner for him the first time. It seemed that Bill with all his training was an amateur Italian cook compared to Nancy. She finally told him that her mother's maiden name was Romero, and she was a 2nd generation Northern Italian who learned to cook from her maternal grandmother who had all the recipes from the old country in her head. American-trained Italian cooks tended to drown pasta in sauce, instead of using it as an accent. Ron was glad he liked Italian food! Every night after dinner, he'd quiz her about what she had studied, and not only was she a quick study, she must have had a photographic memory like his. He checked with Dan at the FAA, and he gave Ron verbal permission to teach Nancy flight basics in the TurboGoose, but to go easy, since the TG could be a handful for a novice to fly.

Ron asked Nancy if she were ready to fly. He told her that Dan said it would be OK if he taught

her basic maneuvers using the TG for now, since Ron was an ATP rated pilot, his rating exceeded what was necessary for a standard VFR IP. Nancy squealed and gave Ron a big hug. He took that as a yes, so the next day, he filled the tanks on the TurboGoose, and while he was at the controls, talked her through the pre-flight checklist, radio procedure, and the take-off setup. She watched him like a hawk, and when he received permission to take off, he told her the trick was to push the throttles smartly to full, wait until the airspeed indicator read 80 knots, then to pull back on the yoke until the plane was at a 20 degree nose-up attitude, and hold that until they were above 500 feet AGL, at which point, she could ease off on the yoke until the nose-up was a more sedate 10 degrees, and the turbines were throttled back to their cruise settings. Ron climbed to 2,000 feet, then called the tower. "Allakaket Airlines Number NA17539 requesting clearance for student pilot training."

"Roger, pattern empty below 2,000 feet."

"OK Nancy, I want you to put your hands on the yoke and your feet on the pedals, and just get a feel for what I'm doing with the plane." Ron was doing exactly what Jim had done over 5 years ago with him - was it 5 years already? Ron performed the basic maneuvers without conscious thought, thinking of Jim. He looked up, and they were flying straight and level, but his hands and feet were off the controls, and Nancy was flying the plane.

"Great job Nancy, you're smoother than I was at this time. OK, now I want you to try some gentle turns to the right. Come to heading 180 without losing altitude or airspeed."

She remembered from her reading to hold the nose level, no more than 15 degrees of bank, and to add throttle if necessary. She came out of the turn at the same altitude, at a heading of 179, and the same airspeed.

"Well done sweetie. You remembered everything you read, and now you're applying it. OK, same turn to the left."

Either Ron was a better instructor, or Nancy was a better student, because she did everything he asked her to flawlessly the first time. She was fearless as well, because she had no problems flying the plane on the ragged edge of a stall. "let's see" thought Ron "She can cook, she's a good kisser, likes to fly planes, is a good shot, and likes animals - sounds like a winner to me." After another half hour of Nancy flying the plane, Ron took the controls and returned home. After they landed, Ron turned to Nancy, "That was the best job of student flying I've ever seen, are you sure you've never flown before?"

"Nope, just flying with you from the right seat, but I learned a lot watching you, you seem to have a very light touch on the controls, so I just copied what you did."

Ron leaned over and gave Nancy a big kiss. When they came up for air Ron taxied the plane back to the ramp, extended the landing gear, stopped at the fuel pumps and filled up, then taxied

to the hangar.

Ron spent the rest of the day with the tractor pulling stumps. When he was finished, Bill said he had a 10HP rear-tine rototiller that he could borrow, so he drove over there to pick it up, and came back home, rolled it down the ramps to the gravel, and out into the back yard. Whoever had cut the trees to build his house left piles of wood chips that Ron had distributed all around the garden plot, then he used the rototiller to turn them into the soil. It was too late in the season to plant this year, so he just left it so the chips would decompose and build up the soil.

The next day, Ron got an e-mail from Steve telling him Barrett's had another T&E project for him, and they needed him at MacDill ASAP. Ron replied, asking if he could bring his fiancé. Ron thought "what a way to find out I'm getting married!"

Steve replied "Sure, bring her along, Que Paso?"

Ron replied "Oops - forgot to tell you I'm getting married in a few weeks."

Ron called Nancy, and asked her if she'd like to spend a week at MacDill AFB. The look she gave him told him that she needed more information.

"Steve asked me to come to MacDill for that T&E project for Barrett's, obviously they have some new toy for me to try out that they don't want to get out of their control. Besides, they pay me \$20K per evaluation, and they gave me 2 Barrett's rifles and scopes worth over \$50K total."

"Why didn't you say so - let's go!"

Ron replied to Steve's last e-mail telling him that they could be to Elmendorf whenever they wanted them.

5 minutes later Steve said the JSOC's VC-20 would be on the ground at Elmendorf and ready to go at 0900 tomorrow, and they could leave their rifles behind this time.

Ron replied they would be there at 0900 and ready to go.

Ron told Nancy that they needed to be wheels-up by 0800 tomorrow, since they needed to be in Elmendorf at 0900 to meet General Shepard's VC-20 then for a ride to MacDill AFB.

Nancy went into her bedroom, set her alarm for 0600 (she was starting to think in military time from hanging around all these pilots) and packed enough clothes to last a week. She packed every piece of lightweight clothing she had, since even in May, Florida can be hot. She packed a light windbreaker since it was light and reasonably water proof. Ron walked into his room, and did the same, then they set their bags by the front door.

Nancy made a beautiful Italian dinner, and Ron said grace, then they ate dinner, laughing and joking. They watched a movie after dinner, and went to bed early. Their alarms went off at 0600, within a minute of each other. Ron was glad he had installed the 100 gallon hot water reservoir with a back-up heater unit. The heliostat outside was making more than enough hot water for them, and he considered putting in a Jacuzzi. They ate breakfast and were out the door at 0700. He pulled the TurboGoose out of the hangar, and while he parked the truck, Nancy started pre-flighting the aircraft and started the turbine start procedures. By the time he was in the pilot's seat, the turbines were warming up, and as soon as the gauges were in the green, he advanced the throttles and the propellers started spinning. Nancy entered the coordinates for Elmendorf into the nav system, and was in the process of setting the controls to take off while Ron taxied to the water and rolled into the water. He retracted the landing gear as soon as they were totally waterborne, and advanced the throttles to fast taxi. Nancy had completed the pre-flight checks and had set the plane up to take off. Ron turned to her and said "Nancy, how would you like to handle the take-off?"

She squealed like a school girl, and Ron called the tower, and received permission for Nancy to handle the take-off. He reminded her to let the plane get up to 80 knots, then pull the yoke back smartly, and hold a 20 degree nose-up until they were clear of the ridge and at 500ft AGL. They taxied to the downwind end of the lake, and Nancy turned the plane upwind with the rudder, since they had enough airspeed over the rudder surfaces. Once they were facing the correct direction, Nancy put her hand over the throttles, and said "co-pilot's plane" and Ron took his hands and feet off the controls. Nancy moved the throttles to full smartly, and still had half the lake left when she was doing 80 knots, and did just like Ron told her, and the plane screamed into the air. At 500 AGL, she eased forward on the yoke, reduced throttle to the cruise setting, and turned toward Anchorage, all without being told. She even remembered to clean up the flaps as the plane accelerated to cruise speed. Since she needed the stick time, they didn't use the autopilot. Ron sat back, grinning like the Cheshire cat. He could see Nancy really loved flying, and wasn't faking it. She wanted the controls in her hands. Ron made the radio call at 0845, and as they approached the runway, he asked Nancy if it were OK for him to land the plane, since a wheeled landing in the Goose was touchy. She reluctantly agreed. Ron called "Pilot's plane" and Nancy let go of the controls. Ron set the plane up for landing, with Nancy watching his every move. She noticed that he was going faster and flatter for a ground approach, and asked him. "Ron, the setup for wheeled landing is totally different than when you land on the lake."

"Nancy, for 1 thing, the runway at Elmendorf is almost 3 miles long, and we'd be taxiing forever if we landed at anything below 80 knots, so I hold it at 120 knots until I'm over the landing threshold, and retard the throttles slowly until we land at 80. Watch me carefully." Ron held a 10 degree nose-up until he cleared the landing threshold at 50 feet AGL, then retarded the throttles to 80 knots, and the plane sank to the runway, kissing the tires, and landing without a bounce. He let the plane roll, since they had over a mile of runway left. A "follow me" truck was waiting at the end of the runway, when it activated its lights, and Ron followed him. They pulled up next to the VC-20 at 0855 and shut down. They grabbed their

bags, exited the aircraft and locked it up, then walked over to the VC-20, where their ID's were checked by the crew chief, and they were escorted aboard the aircraft. At 0900, they were headed toward the runway, and were soon flying to MacDill. They were resting in their VIP seats next to each other and holding hands. Later that afternoon, they landed at MacDill, and a much grayer Steve was waiting for them. Steve hugged Ron, and when he was introduced to Nancy, he hugged her too. Ron said "Sorry I didn't tell you sooner, it slipped my mind."

"Well now I know what you're doing instead of the Air Force."

"Steve, you've got it wrong, I was set to go right up to the point that Congress basically disbanded the Air Force, sent all their transport and cargo aircraft to the Army, and their strategic bombers to SAC as a separate unit, then divided their fighter wings between the Navy and Marines, but only half of them were taken, and the other pilots were RIFed. There was no way I was going to fly the Strike Eagle, and I was already worth 2-3 Million dollars by then, and starting my own Airline. I met Nancy when Dan from the Anchorage FAA office invited me to church after I attended the Saturday Christian Businessman's Prayer Breakfast."

"Sorry Ron - I guess I figured this all wrong. Anyway you did the right thing. If I weren't in a Special Forces Command, I might have gotten RIFed as a junior Colonel, since there were dozens of Colonels in the Air Force with more seniority than me getting RIFed right out of fighter wings and Supply commands. Congress is really making a mess of the military, and if it weren't for George Bush's attraction to small mobile forces like Special Forces, MacDill might get closed too. You don't need to worry about Elmendorf, it has way too much strategic value for even those idiot politicians to even think about closing it."

"How's Bear Doing?"

"You mean Chief Simmons, he put in his retirement papers. He's a senior Chief, and he's not going to get promoted, and he already has his 20 years in."

"Is he still on base?"

"He has to serve another 3 months before they can replace him. He's still on base."

"So what's Barrett got up their sleeves this time?"

"You'll have to see it to believe it."

They got in Steve's Hummer and drove to the VIP quarters, where Steve had arranged a 2-room suite since they weren't married yet. Steve didn't say anything, but he thought Nancy was prettier than Samantha. After they had checked in, Steve asked Ron if he wanted to see what all the secrecy was about. The 3 of them got into Steve's Hummer again, and drove to the shooting range, where this big huge thing was covered by a tarp. The range master came out to greet

them, and told Ron “You’ll never guess what Barrett’s is up to this time!”

They walked over to the tarp, and Gunny removed it with a flourish. A huge gun was mounted on a 6x6 cube of reinforced concrete. The barrel looked like it was a foot in diameter, and the camera mounted to the top of the barrel had the biggest telephoto lens Ron had ever seen.

Being a big movie buff, Gunny said “I give you Robo-gun!”

When the chuckles died down, he explained that the military was so impressed with what Barretts did with their 50BMG rifle, they wanted to see what they could do with the Bushmaster 25mm Autocannon. This was the result, a suppressor and a precision traverse and elevation mechanism that could withstand the recoil energy of the 25mm round, and hopefully had the accuracy of the BMG-50 Barrett’s rifle. That’s where Ron came in. In this case, his sight was a TV monitor, and his control was a joystick/trigger combination that looked like it belonged on a video game. That wasn’t too far from the truth, the military took the Flight Stick, and asked the manufacturer to change it slightly and ruggedize it to Mil-spec standards. This was the result. It had a cage over the trigger, because the trigger was set to less than 2 oz of pull, and the vernier ratio of the control could be set from anything between 1:1000 and 1:1. They installed it in a bunker to protect the gunner for testing, and it would replace the Bushmaster in the Bradley and other US vehicles if they could make it work. It would take Ron 2 days just to read the manuals and learn to operate the controls before they did any firing.

They walked over to Gunny’s office, and he had 3 huge manuals, and a smaller thin paperback that he said would be the most useful. The other 2 were highly technical manuals for engineering, maintenance, and repair. Ron read the cover page and the table of contents. He was amazed at the level of technology, this gun was truly a point and shoot gun. It had a laser range finder/designator, ballistic computer, image and barrel stabilization system capable of compensating for travel over rough ground at up to 60mph, and a T&E mechanism that could track and fire at 10 separate targets per minute. All the gunner had to do was put the target in the crosshairs, and squeeze the trigger, sending a pulse of laser energy to the target, and as soon as the computer had calculated the trajectory, the gun fired, destroying the target. Or, the mode that he was most interested in was the long-range precision fire mode in which case it behaved more like the Barretts light 50, and fired a single round at a target over a mile away with a 95% or better probability of kill. According to the manual the camera system was an integrated day/night system capable of 100x magnification in either day or night mode, with an infrared laser illuminator/designator/rangefinder that selected its transmission power based on whether it was being used as an illuminator, as a designator for a laser guided weapon, or as a rangefinder for the gun. This was one smart gun. If the suppressor worked as well on this gun as it did on the Barretts, the only clue the enemy would have when they were being shot at would be when a BMP blew up. Enemy Generals would have to watch their step as well, because Barretts was attempting to make the Bushmaster 25mm Auto cannon sniper accurate out to a mile. Even enemy tank commanders would be forced to button up, or risk getting shot by a hidden Bradley with the new cannon. Ron finished the paperback manual, and asked Gunny what the T&E

protocol was this time. He told Ron they would have 2 days of day testing planned, 2 days of night testing, and then 2 days at a moving target range where they would test the gun's ability to engage multiple targets. Ron said he wasn't qualified to perform the last test, but Gunny disagreed, since they wanted someone with minimal familiarity with the gun to try to engage multiple targets at various ranges, because the average gunner wouldn't have thousands of rounds to practice with the gun either and it had to be extremely user friendly. They adjourned for the rest of the day, since the Barretts tech rep wasn't there until tomorrow morning. Ron asked Steve if they could meet Bear. He pulled out his cell phone and made a phone call. Then he handed the phone to Ron. "Bear, I'm here with my Fiancé, sure I'd love to go diving, but I wanted to ask you if Nancy could come too - OK" (covers mouthpiece and asks Nancy what size swim suit she wears - Medium in a one piece) "Bear, she wears a medium in one piece if you've got one. The commissary does - great, I'll buy her a suit and we'll be right over."

"Nancy, how would you like to learn how to scuba dive?"

"You're kidding Right?"

"Nope, Bear, excuse me Chief Simmons is a SEAL diving instructor, and also a PADI dive master and diving instructor. They've got a boat all set up to go, and if you can swim, we can start in the ocean and skip the pool stuff since I'm a certified diver too."

"Great, let's go."

"Steve, we need to buy Nancy a one-piece swimsuit at the commissary. Since you're the only one here with privileges, we need you to come with us."

Steve drove them to the commissary, and Nancy spotted the perfect suit. 10 minutes later, they drove up to the dock. Bear was waiting for them, and gave Ron a bear hug, and when he introduced Bear to his Fiancé, Bear said "Well let me be the first to kiss the bride" and swept her off her feet and kissed her lips. When she came up for air, Nancy was laughing "that tickles!" evidently Bear's fu Manchu mustache went up her nose. She grabbed her suit out of the Hummer, and they made their way aboard. Steve drove back to his office. Ron and Nancy went below to change. Ron changed first since it only took a minute to put on his trunks. When Nancy came out, Ron had a hard time breathing. The suit fitted her like a second skin. Ron said "I think we better get a dive suit on you right now, or else we'll never make it to the wedding." He handed her the 4/3 suit Bear had selected for her. The suit still was form fitting, but at least she didn't look like she was wearing blue paint and nothing else. Ron considered taking a cold shower before Nancy kissed him, and then he really needed one. He started to blush, and Nancy laughed when she realized what had happened to her fiancé.

When she got a good look at him she said "Maybe we better make that 6 kids!"

Ron put his suit on as well, and was glad to see it had the desired effect. He would be glad to

get into the cold water. Once they were all suited up, they came up on deck, and Bear's chin nearly hit the floor when he got a look at Nancy. He refrained from giving her a wolf whistle since her fiancé was standing there, and they were his friends. He set the autopilot on the boat now that they were out of the channel, and they went below to the galley where they could sit in comfort, and he could give Nancy her basic diving instructions. 2 hours later they arrived at the shallow reef they had first dived, and Bear took out the aqualungs, and Ron suited up by himself. Bear was pleased to note his confidence and expertise, and asked him about it.

"I went scuba diving with Bill Ayer last winter in Kauai, we spent a week diving the reefs, and I got a lot of practice."

"That must have been fun. Bill Ayer, were have I heard that name before?"

Nancy said "He's the CEO of Alaska Airlines. Ron owns Allakaket Airlines, and they just became a feeder airline to Alaska Airlines."

"Ron if that's true, you must be rolling in the dough."

"I've got more than I need, if that's what you mean."

Ron and Bear helped Nancy into her BC and tank assembly, and showed her how to attach everything. Ron did the hands-on stuff while Bear did the talking. Once they were suited up, Bear put on his gear, then Ron and Bear checked each other out as a final safety check. When they were ready to go, Bear stepped off the end, then Ron and Nancy, who made sure to hang onto her facemask and regulator as she went. She finished her step, which drew her legs together and stopped her descent as it was supposed to. Bear and Ron were close by, but she seemed at ease in the water so they let her get used to the equipment. After swimming on the surface, she spotted a fish and dove down to check it out, with Ron at her side. She sat there motionless admiring the fish, and breathing underwater like she had been doing it all her life. Finally Ron could stand it no longer, and gave her the "surface" sign. They both took their regulators out of their mouths on the surface. "Any thing else I need to know about you?"

"I used to go skin diving years ago when we lived in Florida, so Scuba is no major difference, except I can breathe under water."

"OK, follow me, just make sure you don't hold your breath, and if your ears hurt, stop and clear them before diving deeper."

They put their regulators back in, and Ron gave Bear the OK sign, and the "down" sign. The trio all dove and slowly swam for the bottom 30 feet below. Nancy's dive computer was strapped onto her left forearm, in the "beginner" position so she could monitor her air at a glance. They stayed down an hour admiring the fish. Ron pointed out some bigger reef fish, and Nancy was impressed, since as a skin diver she rarely got this deep, and wasn't able to stay

down more than a fraction of a second. An hour later, Ron looked at his gauge, and it was getting low enough that they should surface. Ron got Nancy's attention, and he looked at her gauge, and she had way more air than he did, but since he was getting low, he looked at Bear, and gave him the "surface" and "air" signs. Bear nodded, and the 3 of them slowly ascended to the surface. When they got to the surface, they swam to the boat. Bear climbed the boarding ladder first, then Ron and Nancy. Bear helped Ron, and they both helped Nancy. Once they had their tanks and gear off, Ron and Nancy went below, and Nancy gave Ron a bear hug. If he hadn't been wearing a wetsuit, Ron might have been embarrassed by his reaction, instead he held his fiancé and told her he loved her. "Nancy, I just figured out what we can do on our honeymoon?"

"Besides this?"

"We can do that all you want, but I think you really like diving. We can go diving anywhere in the world whenever you want."

"OK, let's get out of these wet suits and back into civvies before I give you a heart attack."

"You noticed?"

"Ron your heart was racing when I was holding you, and when I walked out in that suit, you looked like you weren't going to wait for the wedding."

"Sorry dear, it's just I didn't realize you had such a stunning body."

"What about when I was wearing the dress?"

"That was different. Your swimsuit was skintight - literally."

"Now I know why you wanted to get that wetsuit on me so fast - you poor dear."

"Even still, you almost gave Bear a heart attack when you walked out on deck."

"OK, Ron, I'll shower and change first, then I'll make sure to leave plenty of cold water for you!"

Ron hugged Nancy again, then smacked her bottom and told her to get in the shower while she still could. She scampered into the bathroom and locked the door behind her.

"What a woman!"

15 minutes later Nancy came out much more presentable, and gave Ron another hug and a deep soul kiss.

When they came up for air, he said “What was that all about?”

“I just wanted to give you a reason for the cold shower you’re going to have to take - they’re out of hot water.”

“Now you know why I installed that 100 gallon tank at the house.”

Ron got dressed and they headed back to the dock. Bear called ahead, and Steve was waiting for them. Before they left, Bear gave Nancy another hug and kiss, and Ron a big hug. Ron pulled one of his Allakaket Airlines cards out of his wallet, and made Bear promise to call him when he got out of the Navy. Bear looked like he was about to cry, so Ron turned to leave, and walked with Nancy to Steve’s Hummer. He took them back to the VIP quarters, then left since he had a ton of paperwork to fill out.

Chapter 4 - Robo-Gun

The next morning Ron and Nancy ate breakfast, and Steve drove them over to the range where Gunny and the Tech Rep from Barretts were waiting for them.

“OK, Ron, we’re all set to do the preliminary daylight tests of the gun. We had Lake City make a special batch of match ammo that matches the specs of the military 25mm round, but with a solid bullet instead of High explosive. I’ve already set up a target at 1,000 yards. It’s your job to take these rounds, and see if you can shoot as small a group as you did with the Barretts.”

“Gunny, I hate to tell you but last week at Elmendorf I shot a 6 inch group at the 1,000 yard line with the suppressed Barrett!”

The tech rep was all over Ron asking him questions, it seems no one had managed to shoot a group that small yet with ANY Barretts rifle. His tape recorder was spinning, recording Ron’s every word for later analysis. Finally they led Ron and the rest of the group to a bunker and stuck Ron inside a cubicle. Gunny said they were inside a sound and explosion-proof bunker for their own protection, since if the gun blew up in testing, it could kill everyone in a 30 foot radius, and since the gun was electronically aimed and fired there was no reason for the operator to be anywhere near the gun. Ron agreed, but still preferred to pull his own triggers, not let some machine do the job. Then he remembered Robo-gun was totally a machine, not a rifle. He remembered something from a Bruce Willis Movie called The Jackal. He used a 25mm auto cannon just like this to attempt to assassinate the First Lady. He asked the Barretts tech rep and he admitted that they got the idea from the movie, but their weapon had several features the gun in the movie didn’t. The tech rep inserted a key and turned it, and Robo-gun came to life. The screen lit and Ron experimented with the joystick controls. Just like the manual said, he could control the sensitivity of the stick from a 1:1,000 ratio to 1:1 by turning a knob on either the azimuth or elevation control. Ron was amazed how steady the gun was even at the 1:1 setting. It slewed and stopped on a dime with no overtravel. He was running the gun in “sniper” mode so it didn’t track targets but it increased the accuracy of each shot by using the stabilization software to eliminate all vibrations in the system. He focused the camera on the target, then dialed up the zoom ratio until it was maxed at 100:1. At that point, the target looked like it was 10 yards away. He carefully centered the crosshair image on the center of the target, pressed the lock button, then uncaged the trigger and as soon as he touched it, the gun barked, and a 25mm hole appeared right in the center of the target. When the smoke cleared, Ron noted the crosshairs were still centered on the bullseye, and he triggered the gun again. Once the smoke cleared, he noticed there was only 1 hole on the paper. Either this gun was super-accurate, or way off. He hoped the former. Just to be sure, he tripped the trigger until he had fired the gun 5 times. The Tech Rep reached over, switched off and removed the key, disabling and safing the system. Once he was sure the system was off, Gunny sent a runner to pull the target. They almost fell over in amazement when there was just one hole in the center. Gunny laid the target on a light table, and examined it using a 10x magnifier. He could see the evidence of multiple

tears in the paper surrounding the hole, and theorized that all 5 rounds had gone through a 28mm hole at 1,000 yards. The Barretts Tech Rep was jumping up and down yelling, then he called Ronnie Barrett, “Mr. Barrett, yes Ron Williams just test-fired Robo-gun, and it works perfectly. According to Gunny, it just shot a 28mm 5-shot group at 1,000 yards! That means any deviation from that number from here on out is probably a function of platform instability, since when it’s bolted to a 6x6 block of concrete, it shot a one-hole group. Now all we need to do is test the software to see if it works in the other modes. Yes, thank you Mr. Barrett.”

“Ron that was Ron Barrett, the owner of the company. I think he’s dancing a jig about now, and he told me to tell you well done. It will take us a day to move and reset the gun to their moving target range, so we’ll see you at 0900 tomorrow at the moving target range.”

Ron had Bear’s cell number, so he called it. “Chief Simmons, this is an unsecured line.”

“Chief, its Ron. We have the rest of the day off, feel like going diving?”

“Sure, just tell your fiancé that the doc upped my BP meds thanks to her!”

“I know, she’s a hottie - Ok, see you in half an hour.”

“Nancy, that was Bear, if you want to we can go diving again today. By the way, he said the doc had to up his BP meds after yesterday!”

“Poor Guy!”

They walked out of the bunker and Gunny must have called Steve, because he was waiting for them. “Steve, I’m sorry you get stuck playing chauffeur to us, but I really appreciate it.”

“Ron, don’t worry about it; General Shepard just got a phone call from Ronnie Barrett, it seems that your first test was an amazing success. News like that puts him in a good mood, which makes my job easier. Besides this way I get to spend some time with you. So you guys set a date yet?”

Nancy spoke up, “Steve it’s May 15th, hope you can make it because you’re invited.”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the world. I’ll make sure the general’s VC-20 is available.”

“Good thing Bill doubled the size of the Inn, we’ll probably need all the rooms for out of town guests. That reminds me, what about your family Nancy?”

“I lost touch with most of them, but I’m sure my mom can track them down, or is still in touch with them. I was the youngest of 4 kids, and everyone else is much older than me and scattered all over the US.”

Steve drove them to Bear's diving boat, then told Ron he would see them later.

Bear hugged them like long lost relatives, but didn't kiss Nancy this time.

"Bear, I'm sorry I almost gave you a heart attack. I didn't know the suit fit so well."

"That's OK Nancy, it just reminded me my heart still works at 100% rpm."

They all laughed at that, and they walked aboard.

"Nancy you better get dressed by yourself this time, or we might not make it to the wedding."

Bear spoke up, "Nancy, I hope you don't mind, but I switched your 4/3 suit for a 6/4 suit, I don't think I can handle any more excitement!"

Ron joked "Well Bear, I am a Certified Paramedic in Alaska!"

"That's great Ron, but I don't have a defibrillator."

"That's OK, I'll just use a couple of spark plug wires."

Nancy took the opportunity to duck into the forward stateroom and change. She spotted herself in the mirror after she put her suit on, and was amazed that Ron didn't attack her on the spot the first time. She quickly stepped into her wetsuit and zipped it up. She looked in the mirror again, this time she still looked curvaceous, but not too revealing. She'd have to make it up to Ron later. When she finished dressing, she opened the door and Ron was standing there.

"Better?"

"Much better Nancy, now poor old Bear won't have a heart attack."

"Sorry Ron, I got a look at myself in that swimsuit, and I'm amazed you were able to keep your hands off me!"

"Just wait until our wedding night, I'll make it up to you."

"Ron, take it easy, I'm already up to six kids."

Ron and Nancy had a good laugh, then she left the room to Ron so he could get dressed. 5 minutes later he was wearing a pair of SEAL trunks, but it was Nancy's turn to ogle him since he hadn't put his wetsuit on yet. All those years hauling wood and stuff must have paid off because his upper body just rippled with muscle. He didn't look like a body builder, just like a man in peak physical shape. She handed him his wet suit, and soon they were ready to go.

They walked up on deck, and Bear told Nancy “Much better - you better wear a 6/4 suit from now on.” They both had a good laugh and Bear told them they were about an hour away from their dive site. They spent the time training Nancy for her PADI cert, and giving Ron some refresher information. When they got to the site, a shallow wreck Bear and Ron had dove before, they suited up and checked each other, then jumped in the water. The three of them swam around the whole wreck, and Bear kept an eye on his dive computer, because they didn’t want to exceed their no-decompression limits. When his computer said they had 5 minutes to surface, he got their attention, and they rose to the surface. They both had air in their tanks, but Ron realized that Bear didn’t want to make them decompress by staying down too long, and they could go diving again tomorrow. Ron and Nancy got changed, and then they met in the galley after Bear had pulled up anchor, and set the autopilot for home. They continued Nancy’s training in the galley, and Bear told them that after a couple more sessions, Nancy would qualify for her open water cert as well.

The next morning, Steve drove Ron and Nancy to the moving target training area, and told them he’d drive them over to the dive boat when they were finished. Since they knew the gun was safe, they didn’t need the bunker, and used a plywood enclosure to duplicate the conditions inside a vehicle. Ron had been reading up, and as soon as the tech rep activated the system, Ron configured it for moving target, stationary vehicle shooting, and he told the gunny he was ready. He had the display zoomed out wide enough to ID targets as they appeared, and he slewed the crosshairs onto each target as they popped up, and pressed the trigger, designating them. The gun tracked the targets independently and destroyed them in the most efficient pattern. There were over a dozen targets moving at once, and the gun lagged behind Ron by 3 targets, but the target never needed to be re-acquired, and each hit was deemed a kill based on location. Ron thought this was just like the video games he used to play on his computer, except he was firing real bullets. 5 minutes later, the Gunny halted the scenario, he had run out of targets. Gunny checked his display and Ron had scored a perfect score, all targets from 100 yards to a half-mile had been engaged and destroyed.

Gunny and the Tech rep were incredulous, and grilled Ron. He explained that it was just like the video games he played growing up on his computer, except this one fired live bullets. The basic eye hand coordination was something any 14-yr old video addict developed naturally. All this scenario needed was some sound to make a good video game. The good news was the gun definitely worked. Now all they had to do was try this at night. The tech rep told Ron to be back at 2000 for the night test. Gunny called Steve, and an hour later they were aboard Bear’s dive boat headed to another cool diving spot. Nancy only needed 2 more dives and to pass the written test to get her open water cert. They got home later that afternoon, and Ron had to get right to bed because he had a long night ahead of him. At 1930, Steve knocked on his door, and they drove to the moving target range. Ron ran the same scenario with the same results. The camera worked the same day or night, and Ron had no problem designating and engaging targets. They spent more time writing up the report than he did shooting. He was home before 2200, and back in bed. The next morning they met in Gunny’s office to write the report, and then the Tech rep for Barrett presented Ron a check for \$50 Thousand. Ron Barrett thought the

extra was a well-deserved bonus, and Ron didn't complain. The rest of the test had to wait for another prototype to be built and installed in an existing Bradley. Ron made a couple of suggestions that the Tech Rep took extensive notes on, like how to stabilize the Bradley IFV for long-range precision shooting. He thought if they used outriggers like a crane used, but smaller and lighter since all they had to do was keep the vehicle from rocking while the gun was firing. He said if they used high-speed hydraulic rams, like they used in low-riders, the outriggers could be deployed and retracted in less than a minute, and the gun would then be able to "shoot and scoot" and engage targets at a much greater distance than previously thought. All they had to do to extend the range of the gun to over a mile was to install the stabilizer outriggers. The gun was capable of pin-point accuracy out to over a mile, and the software worked, all they needed to make it work in a Bradley was to work on the gun/vehicle interface. When they finished, Gunny called Steve, who brought Nancy with him, and they spent the next 2 days diving, and Bear gave Nancy her PADI open water cert after she passed her written test, since she flew through the skills tests. When they left, Bear gave each of them a bear hug, and Ron made him promise to call him when he got out, he had some ideas that Bear might be interested in.

When they got back to the dock, Steve was waiting for them. They were scheduled to fly back to Anchorage at 0800 tomorrow. They could have flown tonight if they didn't go diving. Ron told Steve that Nancy got her PADI open water certificate as well.

"I can guess where you guys are going on your honeymoon, someplace you can go diving."

"That and someplace with big comfortable beds and air conditioning."

Steve drove them back to the VIP area, and ate dinner with them, then they walked over to their room, kissed each other goodnight, and went to bed.

They were up at 0600, dressed and packed, then they went downstairs for an intimate breakfast by themselves, since there wasn't anyone staying in the VIP quarters right now besides themselves. Steve showed up at 0745 to take them to the VIP terminal for their flight back to Anchorage. They breezed through security, and boarded the aircraft. 2 minutes after they were seated and belted in, the plane taxied and took off. They slept through the flight. Ron found out Nancy's shoulder made a pretty good pillow. They put the arm up between them so they could be comfortable, and it worked. They landed in Anchorage around noon, and taxied right next to Ron's plane. They boarded the aircraft, and Ron asked Nancy if she wanted to take it off.

"You mean the plane of course?"

"No, I thought we'd join the mile high club, of course the plane!"

Nancy did just as good of a job preflighting the plane as Ron did, and he called the tower to get

take-off clearance. She taxied to the correct runway, and when they got clearance, she advanced the throttles, and pulled back on the yoke once they were going fast enough. Since there were no obstructions, she eased the yoke forward and cruise climbed to 2,000 feet and flew to Allakaket. Ron decided to let her handle the landing, and she did it perfectly. Bill was waiting for them, and he almost fainted when Nancy told him she landed the plane. Ron handed him a check for \$50 thousand and asked Bill to put it in their account. Bill said “Not bad for a week’s work!”

“More like 8 hours, and 4 days of goofing off and diving. Nancy’s got her PADI cert now.”

“Not bad. Ron, Slim died while you were gone. Ordinarily I wouldn’t need to tell you except you were the only person mentioned in his will. He owns a huge chunk of land, and he had half a million in his bank account left over from that gold strike on his land way back when.”

“Bill, what are you trying to tell me?”

“Slim owned several thousand acres of land, and its prime real estate he bought back when land was cheap out of the proceeds of his gold mine. The land’s worth millions, and he had another half million in the bank. You could retire today and never work another day in you life and your lifestyle wouldn’t change.”

Nancy hugged Ron and said “Oh My God, I never expected this!”

“Don’t worry Nancy, the money won’t change me. Matter of fact, I have a couple of ideas that I want to bounce off of you. Remember Bear, well he always wanted to retire to a nice spot, and he told me he might want to start a survival school or a dive shop. Bill, can I use your phone?”

They walked over to Bill’s office and he handed Ron the phone, He dialed Bear’s number from memory.

“Chief Simmons, this is an unsecured line.”

“Bear, it’s Ron - You might think this is a bad joke, but I have an offer you can’t refuse. As soon as you can, get yourself up here. How would you like to run a Survival School in Alaska?”

“You’re kidding Right?”

“Nope, that old miner my Mom and I saved a couple of years ago died and willed me several thousand acres of prime real estate and half a million in cash. I figure the land might just be big enough to run a first-class survival school. I’ll take care of all the start-up expenses up to \$500,000 in exchange for 50% of the profit.”

“Ron, you’re an answer to a prayer. I couldn’t find anything worth doing when I got out, and running a dive store for a bunch of snotty rich yuppies that I wouldn’t trust with a mask and snorkel wasn’t my idea of a fun retirement. Does Nancy have any sisters?”

“Sorry Bear, but they’re all married, but there’s some really pretty and nice women in Anchorage, and a whole bunch of single Eskimo women in Allakaket!”

“How many teeth do they have?”

“You mean between all of them?”

Ron and Bear laughed themselves silly.

“Bear, can you make it up here by the wedding on May 15th?”

“Just try and keep me away. If worse comes to worse, I can always swim there!”

“Keep in touch Bear!”

“Hasta La Vista Ron!”

“Bill, you’d like Bear, he looks just like a big Grizzly. He’s a Naval SEAL Senior Chief. He’s about to retire, and the news about Slim couldn’t have come at a better time. I’m going to set Bear up in business running a Survival School. Allakaket Airlines can fly his students to and from the school, and we’ll make money on both ends.”

“Ron, for being just 19, you’ve got quite a head for business.”

“That’s one thing I have to be thankful to Bill Ayer for - he helped me develop my business sense. He also showed us on the night of our engagement party that we want absolutely nothing to do with Anchorage’s Society scene.”

They drove home, and after a long cuddle session, they were both ready for dinner and bed. Even Nancy’s leftovers were good. She made Lasagna by the full-size cake pan full, and they ate leftovers for quite some time. They retired to their separate bedrooms, dreaming of their wedding day.

The next day Ron started cutting and stacking firewood. Between the chainsaw and the tractor, he made short work of dropping a bunch of trees and sawing them to length. Splitting them was hard work, but like his dad said, “No one ever drowned in sweat.”

Later that afternoon, he came in, took a shower, then Nancy treated him to a back massage since he ached all over. He’d have to split wood more often if he got a massage every time.

Nancy called her mom, and asked her to send a list of all her relatives that could make the wedding. They'd fly them from Anchorage to Allakaket, so all they had to do was get to Anchorage, except her, they'd fly down and pick her and Ester up.

A couple of weeks later, Ron was flying into Anchorage when his satellite phone started ringing. He picked it up since very few people had that number.

"Hello, Allakaket Airlines, this is Ron Williams."

"Ron, its Bill Ayer at Alaska Airlines. Did you make any honeymoon decisions yet?"

"No, but Nancy got her PADI diving certificate when we were at MacDill, so it's going to be a diving location."

"Great, because I was thinking what to get you for a wedding present, and I remembered that the corporation owned several condos at some major diving locations. We'd fly you round trip on the G, and all you'd have to pay for was the cost of renting the equipment and the boat."

Bill, that's great, but I'll have to talk to you later after I discuss this with Nancy."

"Ok, I'll e-mail a list of properties we have, then you can discuss this with Nancy."

"Thanks Bill, God Bless, Gotta go!"

"Talk to you later Ron."

Ron wondered what that call was all about, he hadn't seen or talked to Bill in weeks, and all of a sudden he calls up and offers the use of his G and the corporate condo at a diving location. He would definitely talk to Nancy about this.

Chapter 5 - Wedding Bell Blues

Ron flew home to talk to Nancy, and when he got there, she had already read and printed his e-mail with a note written in red “We Need to talk!”

He found her on the bed crying, and he walked in and asked her “Nancy, what’s wrong! Bill sprang this on me out of the blue; he called me on my satellite phone, and asked me. I told him I had to talk to you first.”

“You did? This e-mail sounds like a foregone conclusion. I don’t like him being manipulative like this. He could just give us the cash and let us do our own thing, instead of using the “Company Plane” and “Company Condo” - I tell you I don’t trust this guy, something’s not right here!”

“Nancy, I agree, it’s like he’s trying to suck us into his world, and I don’t want any part of it. I went with him to Kauai before I knew you, and the only good thing out of hanging with him was I found you - and I don’t want to do anything to mess that up!”

“Ron, if it’s all the same to you - I’d like to have our Honeymoon right here - I get the distinct feeling we won’t get out of bed for 3 days anyway - at least!”

Ron pounced on her and started tickling her, and she returned the favor until she found out he wasn’t ticklish. Finally she yelled “Uncle” and gave him a big kiss. With that disagreement settled, he sent an e-mail to Bill saying “Thanks but No Thanks - we’re staying right here for our honeymoon! We want to make our life in Allakaket, and what better way to do that then to spend our honeymoon right here.”

Ron showed Nancy the e-mail before he sent it, and that got him a kiss and a backrub. He was glad he was 19, or he might need some Viagra!

Bill wasn’t happy when he got the e-mail, but he understood. He had noticed that Nancy was really uncomfortable with all the “Society People” ogling her in her slinky dress. Maybe he was hanging around the wrong crowd. Funny, he seemed to remember his ex-wife was a party animal, and he met her at a company party when he was an up and coming VP. Maybe Ron had the right idea. He called his realtor and put the house up for sale. Then he sent Ron the following e-mail:

Ron:

I’m sorry, but I think I might have led you astray. I’m glad you turned down my invitation. I’ve found the Anchorage social scene the totally wrong scene. I’m considering re-locating to a

small town and settling down. I think you have the right idea, and have your priorities straight!

God Bless,

Bill

When Ron got the e-mail, he praised God, then showed it to Nancy. They held hands and prayed that God would open his eyes, and get his priorities straight. Ron asked Nancy how many relatives she would need rooms for, and she cried and told Ron that the only people on her side that had confirmed with less than a week to go were her mom and her aunt. It seemed all her other relatives were too busy to send anything other than a card and a check. Ron held her tight until she felt better. “Nancy, I promise I’ll never take you for granted. You’re the love of my life, and hopefully soon, the mother of my children. I’ll always put your needs first, then the kids, then mine.”

Nancy looked in Ron’s eyes and cried again. She had been hurt so many times before it was hard to trust, now here was the real thing, her Knight in Shining Armor. She melted into his arms and just held him. Finally she looked into his eyes “Ron I love you more than life itself, and I want to spend the rest of my time on earth with you, and I’d love to be the mother of your children. Together, we’ll do our best to raise them right, and raise them to love God and their country. I talked to Steve, and up to 6 months ago, you were going to dedicate your life to your country, then come back and live the rest of your life here; then the government got stupid, and destroyed the very institutions that protect it in the name of Social Equality. I just hope their foolhardiness doesn’t come back to bite them or us! Anne told me about the cabin in the woods, and if things got bad in the rest of the USA, we were to grab everything we could carry and bug out in your plane to the cabin, and stay there until it was safe. I used to be a city girl, but I’ve always had an independent streak, and I’ll never let some despotic government destroy my freedom. We have the resources to prepare and plan just in case the worst happens, but I don’t want that fear to run our lives either.”

“Nancy, I can see you might have been raised in the City, but you’re not a City Girl, you’ll fit right in here. I can’t wait until Saturday!”

“Me either, so you better keep your distance or the Minister is going to be mad at us!

“I can still kiss you - right!” Ron laid a big kiss on Nancy and swept her off her feet like Bear did.

When they came up for air, Nancy said “My Hero!”

Ron laughed so hard he almost dropped her, she did a fairly believable “Scarlet O’Hara”!

They kept busy the next couple of days, and on Thursday, they had their final Marriage

Counseling session with Rev. Bill. “Ron, Nancy - you’re ready to get married, and in my opinion one of the best prepared couples emotionally for the life-time commitment of marriage. Just remember to keep the lines of communication open.” Ron and Nancy spent the next couple of days flying her mom and aunt in from Seward, and getting everything else ready. Nancy had picked out her dress, and Ron’s tuxedo arrived with the last delivery from Anchorage. Bill Ayer flew his Catalina Flying boat to Allakaket on Friday, and spent the day with the two of them. His realtor had no problem selling his house on the hill for a cool \$1.5 Million, and he had 30 days to find another house. Ron suggested another piece of property in Allakaket that was for sale, and he could get a beautiful log house built for around a quarter million on 10 acres, or if he wanted the additional acreage for wood for the fireplace, it would cost him \$300,000.00 more or less. They drove together into town for the rehearsal and rehearsal dinner, and afterward Bill Ayer talked to Rev. Bill about buying a large piece of property on the opposite side of Allakaket from Ron’s place. Bill quoted him a figure that he could easily afford without any additional cash. He decided on a house similar to Ron’s but with a kitchen 3 times the size of his, and 4 bedrooms. At the rehearsal dinner, he met a beautiful young widow with two kids, and they had hit it off. He realized that he was looking for love in all the wrong places. The next day was the wedding, so everyone went home early. Bill and Ron stayed up talking, and Ron told Bill that he knew the woman he was interested in, and she was a sweet Christian lady, whose husband died in a logging accident last year, and had two young children that needed a good Christian father. Bill realized he could run Alaska Airlines from Allakaket as easily as from Anchorage with modern communications gear, and checked into installing a microwave relay that could handle broadband satellite voice and data transmissions. Even with the extra cost, he still had money left over since his house sold for \$1.5 Million to another wealthy Anchorage social climber. Ron and Bill had both stepped off the treadmill, and were out of that rat race.

The next morning was their wedding day, and since they were living in the same house, they decided that the old wives tale about not seeing the bride before the wedding was not only silly, but impractical. Bill had set aside a room in the inn for Nancy to get dressed, so Ron dropped her off with a suitcase full of “girl stuff” and drove to the chapel. Bill Ayer was waiting for him, and they got dressed with 10 minutes to spare. Ron handed Bill the wedding rings, and then at 12:00 sharp, they walked out into a crowded chapel. Ron could see Bear and Hunter in the back row, and his mom Anne in the front next to Steve, with Nancy’s mom Gertrude and her sister Ester on the opposite side of the isle. At 12:05, Nancy marched in to the strains of Mendelssohn’s Bridal March. When she reached the altar, Ron was looking into her eyes, and had to be nudged by Bill Ayer to get the ceremony going. The whole ceremony was a blur to him, except the part where they exchanged their vows. He suddenly felt the solemnity of the moment. He wasn’t just making a promise to Nancy, but to God. With that moment past, he slid the wedding ring on her finger, and she on his, then Rev. Bill said the immortal words, and they kissed. When they turned to walk out the isle, Ron held tightly to Nancy’s hand, and realized he never wanted to let go of that hand. Outside they were pelted with rice, then after a brief walk to the Inn, they sat down for their reception. There was a beautiful 3 tier cake in the corner, and in the other corner was a stack of presents on a table. Some of the larger presents

had been delivered to their house, and there were cards on the table for those. Bill proposed a toast, they cut the cake, and ate, and finally it got to the good part - getting home and their honeymoon. The truck was loaded with presents, and they drove to their new home, and Ron picked up Nancy and carried her over the threshold and set her down gently. Then she said "Race You" and they didn't leave the bedroom for at least 3 days. It seemed Ron had anticipated his wife and had stocked coolers full of beverages and food that didn't need cooking in the house. One of the guys who was responsible for delivering the presents moved them to the master suite while they were gone. They hung a "Do Not Disturb" sign that Nancy had borrowed from the Inn on the bedroom door before closing it.

Chapter 6 - The Morning (Week) After

When Ron and Nancy had finally worn themselves out, Ron opened the master bedroom door, and lay back in bed. Nancy lay next to him and said “Dear, I think we need a room addition.”

“Why’s that?”

“As much fun as we had the last couple of days, we’ve only got a 4 bedroom house, that leaves 3 bedrooms for the kids and if we keep this up, they’ll all be doubled up. There’s plenty of room on the north side of the house for a large room addition. That would give us another 2 bedrooms plus a bunch of storage. If you build it with a shed roof and make it the full width of the existing house, the snow will slide off and you’ll gain at least 3 or 4 big usable rooms, plus some attic storage. I’d dig a basement underneath it first for even more storage. Good news is we won’t need it for a couple of years, so we can do it right.”

“I’m a lucky man!”

“Huh?”

“Beauty, Brains, and she can cook - what a package!”

Nancy rolled over and kissed Ron. Later that afternoon, they finally had to get out of the bedroom - they had run out of food! Nancy went to go fix something to eat while Ron prowled around the house, looking to see what the guys had delivered for presents. He saw a tarp-covered object in his garage that wasn’t there before. He removed the tarp, and 2 brand-new snowmobiles were there with a note from Bill:

Ron & Nancy:

Instead of the trip, I decided to buy you something extravagant but way more practical. I also had a 500 gallon tank of Avgas installed next to your propane tank, there was plenty of room, and the installer said it was plenty safe since the propane and gasoline don’t vent inside the building. I’ll have to remember that when I build my house in Allakaket.

Bill

Once Bill’s house in Anchorage closed, he put everything in storage, and rented a small apartment in Anchorage to use when he had to stay in Anchorage for business, and started construction of his new house in Allakaket. He and Sally (The widow at the reception) had been steadily dating since then, and even her kids liked Bill.

Meanwhile Bear and Hunter had stayed in Allakaket, and forgot all about Anchorage when they

went to the Moose Café and met several middle-aged Eskimo women who had all their teeth. They seemed to spend all of their time with 2 women who were raised in an Inuit village way north above the Arctic Circle. When they moved to Allakaket as adults, they took English names, since everyone had problems pronouncing their Inuit names. Bear's girlfriend went by Mary, and Hunter's went by April. Mary had just turned 40, and Mary was the "spring chicken" of the foursome at 35. Bear had just turned 50, and was in no hurry to raise any more kids, which suited Mary just fine; but Hunter, who was 40, decided he wanted to have as many kids as possible, which suited April just fine. They were living together shortly after the wedding, and as soon as Ron popped up on the radar after his honeymoon, Bear got with him about the Survival School. Ron flew the 4 of them out to Slim's property, and the 2 women loved the area. Bear and Hunter surveyed the room only like a SEAL could, and discovered a hidden compartment in the floor with maps, paperwork, and a suspiciously heavy bag. Bear dumped it into his hand, and it was full of gold nuggets, several ounces of gold that Slim had stashed away for a rainy day and forgot about. Bear handed it to Ron, But Ron told them to keep it. Bear handed it to Mary and told her to put it someplace safe. The 4 of them agreed they would rather live out here than in town. Ron said he would take care of all the construction costs, and the start-up costs for the Survival School up to half a million dollars in exchange for 50% of the profit. Bear was more than happy with the deal, he could do a lot with a half-million to set up a first-class Survival School, especially since their wives were raised in the traditional ways, and knew a couple of tricks the military never taught them.

The 4 of them flew back to Allakaket. Once on the ground, Ron asked Bear point-blank if he were sleeping with Mary. Bear almost told Ron to mind his own business, then remembered he had half a million riding on his answer, and admitted that he was. Ron highly suggested both couples visit Bill and they marry their wives legally and morally. Bear turned to Hunter, and they approached their wives, and the resulting kisses gave them the answer they needed. They marched over to Bill's office, and he took the 5 of them to the chapel and married Bear and Mary, then Hunter and April in a simple ceremony, then handed them blank marriage licenses which they filled out. April and Mary included their native names on the forms as well. Ron told them to make a list of everything they'd need to open the school, and prioritize it since everything would have to come by air. Bear said they would be staying in town until the houses were done since Mary and April already had houses in town, so they would be easy to get hold of. Ron reminded them that if they needed to order anything over the internet, that Bill had a high-speed connection in his office, and since he was his business manager, he could help them with this project as well. Bear gave Ron a bear hug, and told Ron to get back to his wife, he'd take care of everything. Ron drove home to Nancy's warm greeting. She had dinner ready, but decided dinner could wait!

The next day, Bear and Hunter had a preliminary list, and they gave it to Bill. It included construction equipment, some of which they could borrow, some he'd need to order. Bill called Bill Ayer and asked him if he knew anyone who owned a heavy lift helicopter that had enough lifting capacity to lift a backhoe from Allakaket to the new survival school. BA (Bill Ayer) asked Bill if he knew how much the backhoe weighed. Hearing their conversation, Bear

interrupted, and told BA that a Chinook with a lift hook ought to be able to handle it easily, since Chinooks used to sling-load M-113s all the time in Vietnam. BA made some phone calls, and found the prefect setup, a helicopter pilot that worked for a logging company and owned his own Chinook, but wanted a different job, since he wanted to be home every night. BA called Bill back, and told him his idea. He called Ron, and he approved. They would need a chopper in Allakaket enough to make it worth making him an employee and buying his helicopter. BA called the pilot, and he jumped at the chance. 2 days later he flew to Allakaket and interviewed with Bill and Bear, then met Ron. Since there were plenty of vacant houses in Allakaket, Jim (the pilot) was told he could live in Allakaket rent-free for 90 days, then only pay market on his house. Since it was just him, his wife and 6-yr old son, it didn't take them long to move.

The day after they were settled, he started flying supplies up to the construction site, and carried Ron's tractor to the site. With the lifting power and maneuverability of the Chinook, the construction project went much quicker, and they erected two large cabins, 1 for Bear and Mary, and 1 for Hunter and April. They erected a huge lodge in the center of the compound with a separate room with bunk beds. Bear had a well drilled to supply year-round water to the compound, and they cooked on wood stoves and heated with wood. They installed a huge septic field since they had the backhoe, so they could have flush toilets and showers, both of which Mary and April really appreciated. Designing the system to work in the winter was a major headache, but they got it right. They cleared out enough trees when they felled trees for building materials for the 3 big buildings to build a 300-yard shooting range with 6 lanes, which could be used for pistols, carbines, or long rifles. It backstopped into a mountain, so they were OK. The rest of the space was a huge garden that Mary and April tended during the summer, and canned. Bear and Hunter found a huge clearing that should have caribou in the fall, so they ordered 2 7mm Magnum hunting rifles with Leupold scopes.

During his next visit, Ron strongly suggested they purchase 4 .44 Magnum revolvers, since there was bears in that area, and he gave Bear the contact info for the knife maker that made his knife and Ulu/hatchet. Mary and April really liked the Ulu/hatchet, and could use Ron's like pros since they were raised using a real Ulu to cut and skin everything. Ron watched them use his Ulu/hatchet, and wished his dad could see them work. They skinned rabbits they snared in a matter of minutes, and didn't damage the pelt, or waste any motion. Ron tried one under their watchful eyes, and learned how to hold and manipulate the blade properly, and while he wasn't as fast as Mary or April, they nodded approvingly when he successfully skinned a rabbit much faster than he previously had done. They liked his Bowie knife and asked him why the blade was so long, and in reply Ron told the story of his dad and the Grizzly Bear. To say they were impressed was an understatement. They had legends in their village of great hunters that had fought bears, but most had died in the process. Ron explained that Roy hit the bear in the chest with a .54 caliber ball from a flintlock first, and they nodded knowingly. Mary said the flintlock probably saved his dad's life, since the wounded bear might have been more ferocious, but severely weakened. Ron made a present to the newlyweds of a bearskin each, since he had several spares. By the way Mary and April reacted, you would have thought he just gave them the Crown Jewels. When they finished crying, Mary explained how revered bears were in their

culture, and a bearskin given as a wedding gift was a bond of friendship for life. It was Ron's turn to cry, and explain his relationship with Bear. Mary had heard part of this story, but was amazed by the rest of it. She couldn't understand why a man would willingly dive into the deep ocean, but thought it was very brave. When he told them that Nancy had done it too, she rose several notches in their eyes. These white people were brave.

Since it was now getting into their busy season, Ron and Nancy flew together every day, and soon she had enough stick time to earn her commercial ticket. She passed the test for the Commercial, Sea and Instrument ratings with flying colors. Dan said "Congratulations you two, you can now legally fly passengers for hire at night" and handed Nancy her commercial license including endorsements for Sea and Instrument. Ron swept her off her feet and gave her a big kiss. Dan joked "Hey you two want to get a room?" and all 3 of them laughed themselves silly. BA had baseball caps made with the Allakaket Airlines logos, and the titles Pilot and Co-pilot embroidered on the front, with scrambled eggs on the bill. Nancy had to tie her hair into a pony tail to wear the ball cap, and Ron liked the look. After he was done kissing her neck, she asked "Do we have any passengers on the return flight?" with a big grin on her face, and he told her "Sorry, the flight's too short for us to join the Mile High Club!" and they both giggled.

Later that day they delivered a bunch of supplies to the Survival School, and Nancy met Mary and April for the first time. They gave her a gift of a small dream catcher made into a pendant. From living so long in Anchorage, Nancy knew the significance of the gift and they had some quality "girl time" while Bear and Hunter showed Ron the operation. The good news was they had only spent a third of the half-million, and they were almost ready to open for business. Ron asked if there was anything they needed for the school that they hadn't bought already. Hunter mentioned that if they added weapons training, they could just about double their income since they now had a 300-yard range. Ron agreed, and asked what they would need to have a first class weapons school. Bear handed him a list that totaled about \$100,000.00, since they were under budget Ron approved immediately. The list was mostly hardware, target stands, reactive targets and shooting benches, as well as audiovisual gear for the classroom segment. They included 2 spotting scopes, and eye and ear protection. Ron asked them about insurance, and they admitted they missed that item. Ron pulled out his cell phone and called his insurance agent. He was glad BA had installed the Cellular network as part of his Communications setup. The phone connected to a repeater in his plane, which boosted the signal and connected to the cellular tower on his cabin property, which connected to the tower in Allakaket. Other lodges were setting up towers and joining the network as word got out.

A couple of months ago, when BA thought of installing a communications link from Anchorage to Allakaket, one of his board members suggested spending the extra money to set up a privately owned phone company to handle voice/data/cellular for the region, since the only existing service was a single line from Anchorage to Allakaket. BA crunched the numbers, and the potential return on investment made his board members vote unanimously to approve the expense. Alaska Air, Inc. (the parent company of Alaska Airlines) was now in the phone business. The people of Allakaket were happy, and BA made sure he installed switches and

gear sufficient to carry any foreseeable increase in load. They really appreciated the cellular network, and reserved the radio network for emergency communications, or if one of the cell sites went down in the winter. BA made sure the cellular service contracts contained a clause that indemnified the carrier for any loss of service. For his bigger customers, he included a rider for refund of monthly fees for loss of service of more than a day. He set his service fee so low that everyone signed up within a couple of months, and most of the residents of Allakaket who owned computers signed up for Internet service with his Internet Service Provider. He provided coax cable connection to each house in town, and outlying houses like Ron's paid to be connected to his coax backbone. The phone and internet service could be carried through the same cable, reducing costs, and increasing speed and bandwidth.

Ron got in touch with his Insurance Agent, and negotiated an all-risk insurance policy for Alaskan Survival Inc. as a subsidiary of Allakaket Airlines. He made sure the agent knew the company offered firearms training to experienced users only, and 2 retired SEALs were in charge of the company. The agent realized that most of the clients would be Federal or State Law Enforcement, so he gave them a huge break on the normally astronomical insurance rates for firearms instruction. Ron almost choked when the agent gave him a quote on costs, and thought the insurance companies were trying to run firearms related businesses out of business (Some were), but knew the money would be well spent. He had the agent e-mail him a rider, and activate the policy. Then he told Bear and Hunter they were now in business. Bear realized that Ron was a smart businessman, since their business would feed income to him on both ends, their students would fly Allakaket Airlines to and from the school, and Ron also received 50% of their profit, but Bear and Hunter would be making around \$100K a year each according to Ron, which was 2-3 times what they received from the US government, but less than they could have earned as "Security Consultants" to some rich Arab oil sheik. Bear and Hunter were computer savvy enough to make it worth having an Internet presence including a professionally done web page with all the information, and a password protected site for Federal and Law Enforcement only information. Within weeks, bookings started rolling in, and they were in business. One of their first customers was Bill Ayer, who had money to burn, but virtually no survival knowledge, and he realized that if he was going to live in Allakaket, he would need to know a whole bunch of survival stuff. Bear and Hunter spent 2 weeks with him on a crash course, and at the end, he felt he could survive just about anything, and wrote a glowing review in the airline magazine, which was picked up and copied all over the place. Soon Alaska Survival Inc. would be busy year round, with Firearms training during the spring and summer, and survival training all winter. Soon the federal government was sending LEO and military people to check out the program, and they agreed it was top-notch. Within the first year, Bear had to hire additional instructors from the Special Forces community that included skills like Field medicine, long-range shooting, E&E training, and several specialized courses that were taught on a contract basis. They expanded the compound to handle the extra volume, and soon they were making almost as much money as Allakaket Airlines.

BA had moved full-time to Allakaket and commuted 3 times a week for meetings. Eventually, he got down to 1 or 2 trips a week. With his house completed, he had been dating Sally long

enough to know that she was the woman for him, and she was in love with him too. Her son and daughter called him Dad on occasion, BA talked to Bill, who agreed to marry them the next weekend in a small ceremony. That Saturday, BA and Sally, her kids, Ron and Nancy, Bear, Mary, Hunter, and April gathered at the Chapel for BA and Sally's wedding. It was a simple affair, but very solemn. Bill cried when he recited his vows, and Sally cried too, but because she thought briefly of her dead husband, and knew he approved of BA. The reception was at Bill's house, and was more of a housewarming party than a wedding reception, except they had a simple wedding cake. Ron was glad that Bill had finally kicked the "Socialite" lifestyle and settled down. When Ron wasn't flying, he had a long list of "honey-dos" to tend, including cutting a couple of more cords of wood, and getting the house ready for winter. He made sure the propane and diesel tanks were kept full, and the 500 gallons of Avgas was stabilized. Nancy occupied her time decorating the house, cooking fantastic Italian meals, teaching BA at trick or two about "real" Italian cooking, and studying for her ATP rating, she needed thousands more hours of air time, and she got it every time they flew without passengers. By the end of the season, Anne had more landings and take-offs than most commercial pilots with twice the experience she had, since they flew every day. Ron talked to Bill the other day, and he was amazed at how much money they were making between the lodges and the Survival School. Bear was so busy he wished he were twins. Mary and April were busy canning vegetables for the winter when Bear and Hunter came back with 2 caribou each. They were really happy to see their husbands, and now they had provided a kill, which was the final test of a husband in some tribes. Some time later, April told Mary she was pregnant, and they celebrated. Mary thought she was too old, but figured Bear could probably still manage to get her pregnant too. As it turned out, she wasn't too old, and Bear said the dumbest thing in his life when he asked Mary "How'd that happen?"

With the onset of winter, things settled down in Allakaket, and the airline business shut down for the winter except for deliveries and emergencies. Ron was glad that he didn't have to put skis on his plane since the flying boat could land on snow as well as water until someone suggested he might need skis attached to the wheels. He called the maintenance chief at Elmendorf, who got hold of the chief at 19 Wing, who said the plane did take skis over the wheels in the winter, and he had several sets there along with the hardware to install them. If he hurried they could put them on while his runway was still dry enough for them to land conventionally. Ron asked them how long it would take, and he said they could do it in a couple of hours. Ron asked if they could do it first thing tomorrow, that he would take off from Allakaket at first light, and bring both of his planes. If they would copy their manuals so his mechanics could remove and install them, he'd pay them for the copies. The Chief said that they should have a copy in the manuals they gave them with the plane, and he read Ron the number. Ron wrote that number down, and said he'd call them back. He called the Allakaket airport, asked to talk to the Mechanic, gave him the manual number, and asked him to pull it. 10 minutes later, the mechanic said he had it right in front of his face. Ron called the chief at 19 Wing, and told him they had the manual. The Chief told him that since they would be already there, it would be safer to install them in Vancouver instead of risking another landing without them and installing it in Allakaket. He said he could do both planes for \$100 total, and fill them

up with fuel for cost. Ron took him up on the offer, and called Steve, his other pilot, and told him to prepare for a long overwater flight tomorrow to Vancouver BC and back. They were actually closer to Vancouver at Allakaket then at Anchorage, so it was only 1,000 miles each way instead of 1200. Ron walked in to Nancy and told her they were flying to Vancouver Island in BC tomorrow to have them install the skis on their TurboGoose. Nancy asked how long they were going to be in Vancouver, and he said just a couple of hours. Nancy wanted to see the town but knew better than to ask. She packed an overnight bag for each of them just in case.

The next morning at first light both TurboGoose airplanes were winging to Vancouver Island. Nancy had made muffins and coffee for the long flight. As soon as they were at cruising altitude he set the autopilot and asked Nancy if she wanted to join the Mile High Club. She didn't have to be asked twice. Several hours later, they decided to check the controls and make sure they were still on course. The autopilot performed perfectly, and they were on course and schedule, at their assigned altitude. They called Vancouver for landing instructions, and landed an hour later. After the planes were towed to the maintenance facility, Steve came up to him and whispered, "Ron, I've never seen a plane fly without anyone in the cockpit. I called twice, and when I got no answer, I cruised on up and saw the cockpit was empty. I guess that flying with your wife has its benefits!"

"Sorry Steve, we decided to join the mile high club, it won't happen again."

"That's OK; just let me know by blinking your clearance lights twice so I won't disturb you, too bad my wife doesn't like to fly!"

2 hours later, the chief came out and told them the skis were installed, and they included some spare hardware since the nuts and bolts took a beating each season. Ron looked at his plane, and it looked goofy with the skis surrounding both wheels. He hoped they were aerodynamically neutral, or they would have problems. The Chief explained that the skis were aerodynamically neutral, and they added negligible weight, and the wheels still worked fine with the skis on, but they needed to land flatter on a wheel borne landing with the skis on. Ron didn't think that would be a problem, since he almost always landed flat at Anchorage. They taxied to the fuel depot and filled both planes to the max, since it was a long flight. As they were getting ready to get back aboard, Steve couldn't pass up a chance to rib his boss and told him to remember to blink twice. Nancy didn't understand what was so funny, and he didn't explain either. Nancy was hoping for a repeat of the flight down, and didn't understand Ron's sudden inhibitions. Finally she lay back in the seat and went to sleep. When they got home, Ron got to try out the skis, and they worked perfectly, except a snow landing was considerably rougher than a water landing. He could feel the skis helping out as the plane slowed, and he brought it to a stop at the far end of the lake. He turned around and taxied back to the ramp and stopped at the pumps. Once the plane was in the hangar and they were home, Ron finally told Nancy that Steve knew they weren't at the controls, and it embarrassed him. He said he would make it up to her if she liked, but she was too tired, so they fell asleep cuddling instead.

Chapter 7 - Winter of our Discontent

The winter of 2005/2006 was long and cold. Allakaket received a record snowfall, and business crawled to a halt since the storms made flying too dangerous. Even Bear and Hunter shut down due to the weather, since they had recorded temperatures way in excess of minus 100 including the wind chill, which was cold enough to turn survival training into a real-life survival situation, and the risk to the trainees was too great. They had plenty of wood, water, and food, so they snuggled into their beds with their pregnant Eskimo wives and hibernated. Ron was experiencing a major case of cabin fever, since all the stuff he liked to do was outdoors. Ron and Nancy wound up sleeping more and more, or at least spent time in bed. BA and Sally were head over heels in love, and still in honeymoon mode. Before the weather turned bad, he filed paperwork with the Municipal court in Anchorage to legally adopt Sally's children, Mike and Jill. Sally knew that BA was there to stay, and was secure in her relationship with BA. Mike and Jill were old enough to home school, so BA and Sally spent part of their days teaching them the basics including reading, writing, and arithmetic. BA had a real head for math, and was an excellent teacher. His spelling left something to be desired, since all his writing was filtered through a secretary even if he wrote and spell-checked it himself, since it wouldn't do for Alaska Airlines documents to go out with grammatical or spelling errors. Between the 2 of them they made sure the children got a well rounded education. Sally was their primary teacher, since BA still had an airline to run, even if 1/3 of his aircraft were grounded by weather. Alaska Airlines took advantage of the situation to get caught up on their maintenance. Ron thought that was a good idea, and asked the Mechanics if there was any scheduled maintenance they could do in advance on the 2 TG's. He reminded them not to put them both down at once, so they worked on 1 plane at a time. Nancy realized that Ron needed something besides her to keep him occupied, and called Bill, who checked around and called her back. During a break in the weather, she told Ron they were running an errand in town, and to get the truck warmed up. 15 minutes later they were driving into town when Nancy told him "Stop here!" Ron slid to a stop, and she told him they were here; so he got out, not knowing what Nancy had up her sleeve. When they opened the door of the house, they were mobbed by Husky puppies, and Ron knew why they were here. He guessed Nancy realized how much he missed Lucky. She told him, "Pick one."

His task was made much easier when one of the puppies tried to jump up on him. Since Ron was an adult, he wasn't having much luck, but when Ron picked him up, he proceeded to give his face a thorough licking. Ron said "I guess this one picked me, any ideas for a name?"

"How about Sitka?"

"How about Samson - nah, I'd probably call him Sam, and that might remind me too much of either my first dog or Samantha."

“I remember you telling me about her - what’s the story with her?”

Ron gave her the rest of the story, leaving out the gruesome details, and telling her that she was studying to be an ER doc in North Carolina.

“Ron, you really have a good heart. You went out of your way to help that poor girl, asked nothing in return, even when she was throwing herself at you, and now she’s studying to become a Doctor.” Nancy gave Ron a big kiss, then asked the owners how much they wanted for the dog. They said \$200 each, so Nancy wrote a check, and they took the dog. She realized they had no dog food in the house, so she called Bill to see if they had any puppy chow in stock at the store. Knowing that they were going to buy a big puppy, he had already checked, and told them to drive on over, they had 3 bags waiting for them. Ron thought “3 50-pound bags, how much does this moose eat?”

Then he figured out the dog’s name “Honey, let’s call him Moose!”

“Well he’s definitely big enough - Ok, Moose it is!”

Nancy had hidden a bearskin behind the back seat, and when she got in the truck, Ron put the skin on her lap, followed by Moose, who curled up and was fast asleep within minutes. When they got home, Ron was glad he spent all that time with big logs, since the bags didn’t feel as heavy as he thought they should. Moose was too tired to play, so Ron and Nancy decided that a nap was a good idea too.

A few days later, the weather cleared, and Ron decided that enough was enough, and told Nancy they were going visiting on their snowmobiles. They got into their snowmobile suits with clothes underneath them so they could take them off when they were inside. Ron laid a bowl of food and water in front of Moose, and he didn’t even move. This dog could sleep through anything! Finally they were ready to go, and Ron insisted they strap on their fanny packs, and he wore his shoulder holsters. Nancy couldn’t get used to carrying 24/7, so he decided that if she flew with him between his guns and the SU-16, they were covered. She had a Para-Ord P-14 she carried when she was alone or out of the house without Ron. Ron was glad BA had splurged and spent the extra money on the electric start, and the heater system. It still had a back-up recoil start, but he hadn’t needed it yet. He’d called BA and Anne to make sure they were home and OK to have company. Since Anne was closer, they stopped there first. Ron was worried about his mom, since he hadn’t seen or heard from her since the wedding. The first words out of Ron’s mouth were “Mom, are you OK?”

“Why would you say that Son?”

“Well for 1 thing, I haven’t heard or seen you since the wedding.”

Anne started laughing “Ron, I think we’ve got a role reversal here - that’s supposed to be My

line!”

When the laughter died down, Anne told her son what she had been up to. She was working part time at the clinic as the nurse. She received enough money from that so she didn't have to touch her savings, and it gave her something to do. After all, she was still under 60 and not ready for retirement. She spent the rest of the time working on her garden, reading books, or crocheting. Evidently there was a Craft Club in town that taught the younger women in town how to knit, crochet and other lost arts. Anne really liked Crochet, but could knit with the best of them, and had already made scarves that she was saving for presents. She said the only downside to knitting and crocheting was she had finally broken down and bought a set of “granny glasses” since she couldn't see the tiny needles she worked with on some projects. Ron told his mom that they got a new puppy, and she'd have to come over some time and meet him before he got big enough to knock her over. Nancy chuckled and told Anne that Ron had named him Moose, because Bill had set aside 3 50-pound bags of dog food for them, and Ron thought “How much does this moose eat?”

“Ron, he's in good company, According to Roy, Oliver was a chow hound, and I know Sam and Lucky were too.”

Now it was Ron's turn to laugh. A couple of hours later, they reboarded their snowmobiles, and drove to BA and Sally's place. BA met them at the door, and welcomed them. He had an inner foyer where they took off their snowmobile suits, and left them on hooks. Nancy noticed Sally was positively glowing, and the next words out of her mouth confirmed her suspicions. “Nancy, we're expecting!”

Nancy's heart was in her throat, because she had been trying ever since they were married, and now she was the only lady she knew in town that wasn't pregnant except for Anne. Still she felt like congratulating Sally. Mike and Jill took that moment to make their appearance, yelling at each other like brothers and sisters do. “Excuse me - looks like they need a referee” and Sally went to settle the dispute before stuff started getting broken. “You know, these two can be a handful sometimes. I could really use a tranquilizer!”

Horried, Nancy said “Wouldn't that be bad for the baby?”

“No, it's for them - they need to settle down, this pregnancy is taking a lot out of me.”

“Maybe instead of tranquilizers, you ought to invest in Duct tape?”

Sally laughed her head off and said “I never thought of that! Maybe if I keep a roll in plain sight, and just tap it on the counter when they misbehave, they'll settle down.”

“Either that, or we'll have a bunch of neurotic kids that will sue the heck out of us as adults for “mental abuse” or some other BS.”

“Now, Bill, we won’t have that problem unless they become Lawyers!”

That evoked a good belly laugh from the foursome.

“I swear sometimes I’d like to walk into my Legal department with an Uzi, except I might need them to protect me from someone else’s legal department!”

“Bill, if you don’t enjoy it anymore, why don’t you retire, you’re worth what maybe \$10 Million?”

“Last time I counted it was almost \$12 Million!”

“You could retire and live comfortably in Allakaket off the interest.”

“What would I do, I’m too young to retire?”

“Bill’s seriously considering stepping down as my Business Manager, he says it’s too much work for a man his age.”

“Ron, If I ever seriously consider chucking it all, I’ll definitely keep that in mind. I know you can’t pay what I’m earning now, but knowing how generous you are with your employees, I’m sure it would be enough to live comfortably in Allakaket and not touch my savings.”

“Bill, I know this is a bad time to talk business, but how does \$100K per year grab you? The Mayor just wants to go back to being the mayor and his small side business including the bank and deliveries. His bank is making money hand over fist with the \$10 million dollars in deposits between the two of us. He’s a really smart investor, and he’s made some very good loans with the funds we deposited.”

“One Hundred Thousand per year up here, I could live like a king and never touch either the principal or interest of my deposits. When do you need to know?”

“I need to know by April 1st, since that’s when things get busy. One thing, if you do, you better make sure you appoint a successor that won’t try to screw Allakaket airlines, or I’ll lose enough money to hurt.”

“If I do jump, I’ll make sure they draw up long-term contracts for Allakaket. Matter of fact, I’ll do it anyway, since it’s in Alaska Airline’s best interest to keep Allakaket Airlines as a feeder line. You realize that our profitability has gone up 30% since you signed up?”

“No wonder why you’re worth over \$12 Million, your stock options probably jumped 30%!”

“If I do step down, I’ll divest totally just in case he runs the business into the ground.”

“I’d just divest enough to cover yourself just in case. Trust me; you’ll still want to be a major stockholder.”

“Got something up your sleeve?”

“Just a couple of ideas.”

They talked and visited for a couple of hours, and finally Ron said they had to get home before Moose decided he couldn’t hold it any longer.

“Who’s Moose?”

“Bill, we got a new dog, and trust me, the name fits. You’ll have to come over later and meet the moose.”

“Ok Ron, you’ve got a deal.”

Ron and Nancy said their goodbyes, got dressed in their snowmobile suits, put their helmets and gloves on, and started their snowmobiles. They were home 20 minutes later, and Ron let Moose out. He searched the house, and couldn’t find any accidents. He came outside just in time to see Moose watering some nearby trees. When he finished, Ron picked him up and praised him lavishly “Good Moose, you’re such a good boy!” Anne got his ball and they played fetch for a couple of minutes, then Moose made it clear that he wanted back in, he was tired. Ron let him back in, and he padded over to the bearskin rug, and as soon as he had made himself comfortable, he was sound asleep. Nancy made dinner, and after a while, they decided to call it a night as well.

The next day Ron called Bill, the mayor, and told him that Bill Ayer might be willing to take over. Bill was ecstatic, since the stress of running this huge business was getting to him. Between keeping his side businesses running, and handling everything for Allakaket airlines, he was working 60 hours a week, and couldn’t take another season of it.

BA and Sally talked about it, and they agreed that he didn’t need to run Alaska Airlines anymore, that if he wanted to slow down and raise a family, he needed to be home more, because even one days worth of meetings meant he had to spend at least 2 days away from his home and family, and he really didn’t want to fly the PBY during the winter.

BA got with Ron, and they talked for hours about Allakaket Airlines, and what Ron wanted to do, and what Bill thought it should do, and they came to an understanding. Ron was impressed, with BA as his business manager, he would keep the costs low, the seats filled, and handle all his negotiations. Ron really hated the business side of the Airline, and preferred flying over negotiating any day. His favorite quote was he’d rather be flying blind through an Alaskan Blizzard than have to face a board of directors, or negotiate a contract with a vendor. BA made

sure that the recommended contracts with Allakaket Airlines were in effect, then contacted the board, and notified them he would be resigning effective April 1 to become the business manager of Allakaket Airlines. He felt he couldn't in good faith continue to run Alaska Airlines and only visit Anchorage 1 day a week, and Ron had offered him the position recently vacated by his retiring business manager.

Bill was floored when his Board Chairman told him they were thinking along similar lines, and were hoping that something like this would happen. He asked Bill to submit a short list of recommendations to replace him as CEO. The Chairman suggested they stay in touch, just in case Alaska Airlines needed him to rebuild it again. The board thought he did an excellent job rebuilding the company, but now the company needed a fiscally conservative CEO to keep things running, not a hard charger that could fix things. Bill asked the chairman if they had any problem with him divesting enough shares to still be a major shareholder, but not have a controlling interest in the airline. The Chairman said the board would buy any shares he was willing to sell at 20% above market since they felt the shares would increase in value by 20% in the next year, and that increase would be the results of his hard work. Bill was sad to go, but realized they were giving him one heck of a golden parachute. 20% over market, if he sold on an upswing to private buyers, wouldn't affect the market at all, and he'd net another couple of million on the markup. He figured he'd sell 6 million worth of stock and net out 7.2 million, plus a little over \$2 million he had in the bank, he'd have almost \$10 million in the bank. The interest alone on that would be between \$300 and \$600 thousand per year. If Ron kept paying him \$100 thousand per year, his house was paid for; his monthly expenses were between \$1 and \$2 thousand per month, and would be less if he stopped paying someone to cut his wood for him. Even at 2 grand per month, that was \$24 thousand in expenses vs. \$100 Thousand in income. He'd clear \$75 thousand per year that he needed to reinvest. He thought the stock market would be the best place for that kind of money. Since it was over and above his expenses, he could invest it in aggressive growth funds to make it earn even more.

BA called Ron, and they had a long talk, the gist of it was that Bill would accept Ron's offer to become his new business manager, effective April 1 at a salary of \$100 thousand per year. Since Allakaket Airlines was earning almost a million a year in profits, Ron could afford to pay his major employees well. Ron also took a salary of \$100 thousand per year, leaving over \$600 thousand per year of profit to reinvest into the business, or sit in the bank earning interest.

Bill and BA spent several days a week together getting BA up to speed on the business. Bill was sure the business was in good hands, since BA had years of experience running a big business, and his was all OJT. Bill would be glad to slow down and take it easy. The money he made over the years at Allakaket Airlines had been carefully invested, and he too was now worth over \$2 Million. He could literally stop working today and retire on the interest, but wanted to stay busy, since fishing all the time didn't appeal to him. On April 1st, Alaska Airlines and Allakaket Airlines issued a joint statement about Bill Ayer stepping down as the CEO of Alaska Airlines, and becoming the Business Manager of Allakaket Airlines. The next day Alaska Airlines announced the appointment of a new CEO, and it was Bill's first pick. He

was really smart, and had the right personality to manage the airline during this period of stability.

Bear had called Ron and suggested he fly up to the Survival School, they needed a face to face talk, and he should bring Nancy. When they got there, Bear gave him the bad news. The Special Forces were hearing rumblings within Saudi Arabia and other Muslim countries that would be bad news for the rest of the World if they came to pass. He highly suggested buying guns and ammo now while they could, and storing them at the Survival School, since it would be a perfect cover for just about anything they wanted. Ron told Bear to make a list, and he'd approve it. Bear reached in his shirt pocket and pulled out the list and handed it to him. He basically wanted at least 50 cases each of .5.56 and .308 ammo, as well as a dozen AR-15's and M-1a's. He noted "Springfield National Match" next to the M-1a's, and also had enough Leupold scopes for them included. Ron joked "What no Grenade Launchers or TOW missiles?"

"Not from this supplier, but I'm working on acquiring some stuff you really don't want to know about."

"Well in that case, don't tell me. How much is all this going to cost?"

"Including the stuff you don't want to know about, I'd guess about \$300 thousand."

Ron wrote a check for \$500 thousand and made it payable to Alaskan Survival Inc. and coded it to operating expenses and equipment.

Bear said "Thanks Ron, we're going to need the backhoe for a week, and then you really should consider buying extra tanks for JP-5 and diesel, at least a couple hundred thousand gallons, because if my info is correct, it will either be really expensive or unavailable within a year. We're talking about a 10-100 times increase in fuel costs. Even if this doesn't totally happen, the instability could double or triple fuel costs."

"Ok Bear as soon as you're done with the chopper and the backhoe, I'll put the backhoe to work clearing land for the tanks, and digging holes."

"Boss, for the size of the holes you need, you'd be better off drilling and blasting, I've done enough to qualify for EOD" said Hunter, "and what you want is a bunch of ANFO, dynamite, and det cord to break the rocks and loosen the dirt. That's what we did for the basements. It's much faster and easier on the equipment then digging it out using backhoe power only."

"Hunter, if that's the case, I want you to order a sizeable quantity of explosives, at least 3-4 times what we need for this job, in case we need to blast some more holes later."

Bear spoke up "You know Slim had a mine up there, I've just barely gone inside, but we could

get a blasting permit for the mine and order as much explosive as we want.”

“Great Bear, find out how much that all would cost, and get back to me. By the way, if you’ve got time you might want to carefully check out that mine, and find out if it would be profitable to re-open.”

“I was planning on using it next season to practice caving, rappelling, and high-angle rescue techniques. While I’m in there, I’ll take some samples and look around.”

They hiked back to the compound, and Nancy had just finished her visit with Mary and April, so they said goodbye to everyone, and climbed aboard the TurboGoose and flew back to Allakaket. Ron met with BA and told him what Bear had told him.

“That’s funny, I’m getting the same scary messages from my contacts, seems there’s some bad Juju going on in Saudi Arabia. Word I’m getting is someone is setting themselves up to depose the royal family and install a radical Muslim theocracy like Iran there. If that happens, they’ve threatened to cut off all oil to the West, and that means the airlines are in a world of hurt. Even if the Royal Family isn’t deposed, the resulting civil war will greatly reduce oil imports and drive prices 2-3 times what they are now. Stocking up now is definitely a good idea. I’d get somewhere between 500 thousand and a million gallons of JP-5, maybe 500 thousand gallons of Avgas, and 500 thousand gallons of diesel, since the Inn is totally dependant on diesel fuel for their generator.”

“What would it take to re-roof the Major Buildings with those thin-film solar panels, buy some wind generators, a battery bank and an inverter capable to taking the load, and using the generator to charge the batteries if there’s no usable sun or wind. Also, if the price is right, we might want to do that to our houses as well, I mean after all it’s only money, and we’re rolling in it!”

“Right Ron, I’ll check into it, the money won’t do us any good in the bank if we’re sitting at home in the dark freezing and out of fuel! Also, we might want to stock up on food. I’ll talk to Bill and tell him what we know, and ask what needs to happen to make the town ready for this. We owe a lot to these townspeople, and we’ve got enough money to do certain things that will improve their chances of survival, or their quality of life if my information turns out bogus.”

“I highly doubt it’s bogus Bill, because I just got the same info almost word for word from Bear, and I know you didn’t get it from the same sources, since he’s ex-military.”

“Exactly, my sources are highly placed civilians in government, and I’m sure Bear got it through the Chief’s network, which in some ways puts the CIA and the DIA to shame. Their humint is rarely wrong since the USA has military bases all over the world, and the Chiefs have an ear to the ground all the time, and they talk to the locals.”

“Bill, I’m convinced, let’s go to the Mayor and tell him everything we know.”

They drove over to the Mayor’s office. Bill was looking much better now that his stress level was much lower. Ron broke the bad news “Bill, BA and I are both hearing the same thing from two completely different sources, and I think you need to know so we can prepare the townspeople.”

“If you’re talking about Saudi Arabia, I’ve heard that too from multiple sources, so what do you suggest?”

“Bill, between BA and myself, we’ve got over \$15 Million in the bank, and we’ll never spend all of it, so we wanted to do whatever it took to get the town through this crisis. We can’t be dependent on fuel for electricity or heating, since it either won’t be available shortly, or will be so expensive that we can’t afford it. What I’m suggesting is taking the entire town into the Alternative Energy setup. Let’s find out what the electric demand of the town would be, and the cheapest non-oil way to produce it, and we need to get started NOW. I’m going to install million gallon fuel tanks in the fuel farm and keep them full, and BA and I are installing whatever we have to that will make us energy independent. Since we can’t put solar shingles on every house, we need to come up with a community-based power system that will make year-round power.”

“Ron, you’ll never believe this, but the town is situated right over a deep geothermal pocket that can produce enough steam to drive huge turbogenerators, and still have energy left over to heat houses. The reason no one’s ever utilized it was they estimated it would cost \$5 million to exploit it, drill the holes, and install the hardware. The geologist who discovered it 30 years ago said it could generate at least 30 Megawatts for 100 years.”

“BA, he said \$5 million, you want to split the cost?”

“Ron, I’m in if you are - what do you want to call our new business?”

“How about Allakaket Power and Light?”

Ron turned to the Mayor, “Ok, Bill, let’s make this happen. You’ve got \$5 Million to do it, if you need more, just ask!” Ron and BA were happy because they were able to power the entire town, take a loss for tax purposes, and still have power to burn.

After they left, the Mayor found the feasibility study that the Geologist had done as a favor. This geothermal site was a hydrothermal or wet site, so they could use older technology, drill into the hot water, and recirculate it using 2 wells, a production well, and an injection well. Since the water from the wells was likely to have a higher mineral content than normal, he suggested a heat exchanger so the hot water could heat the working fluid, which would be much less damaging to the turbine blades than the hot mineral water. He also suggested opening a

huge indoor public pool/spa to utilize the excess hot water, and act as a reservoir for the wells. The hottest water would be pumped into a huge Jacuzzi/spa, and then into the pool as it cooled to below 80 degrees. The hot water would be between 100 and 120 degrees, with a safety system to prevent scalding, and a display indicating the current temperature of the water. The extra cost for this would only be around \$100 thousand, and the Mayor felt he could donate the money himself. Bill got busy getting quotes from the manufacturers of the equipment, and contractors that could install it.

Chapter 8 - Allakaket Power & Light

Bill couldn't believe his luck. He located a 10MW Steam turbogenerator through a surplus dealer who said it had belonged to a small utility co-op that was forced into bankruptcy by deregulation, and the big power company that bought them out didn't want anything that small, so they stored it, and he bought it for a song. It had been running for just over a year, and had over 20 years left in it, and was rebuildable for 1/3 the cost of new. 10MW turbogenerators were going for \$500 Thousand new, and he would sell it for \$250 Thousand plus shipping to Alaska. The whole turbogenerator weighted 10,000 pounds, so the Chinook could easily carry it and enough extra fuel to make the trip. He located the drilling equipment, and it was cheaper to buy than rent it, so he got a quote for buying a conventional truck-mounted drilling rig capable of boring up to 5,000 feet, and up to a foot in diameter. Next he got a quote on the pipes and pipefitting necessary to connect the wells to the powerplant. Finally, he located a concrete batch plant to make enough concrete, gunite and other materials to make all the concrete they would need. An Alaskan Steel-building manufacturer gave him a quote on 2 of his largest insulated Steel buildings, with roofs designed to handle the snow load. Once he put together the quotes and added the numbers, he was right between \$3 and \$5 Million with plenty of room left over. He got separate quotes for digging and constructing the pool/Jacuzzi complex, with changing rooms and plenty of patio area between the walls and the pools. This figure was right around \$100 thousand, so he called Ron and BA, and they agreed to meet in his office.

"Ron, BA, you're not going to believe this, but I located a good used 10mw 10KV turbogenerator for \$250,000 and they are normally \$500,000 new. It's light enough that the Chinook can carry it and I'm pretty sure it will either fit inside, or he can safely sling load it from Anchorage to here. Here's the rest of the numbers I crunched, and it looks like the entire project would come in at around \$4 Million."

"Bill, what's this line-item at the bottom "mini-Olympic pool with Jacuzzi/sauna/spa"? We didn't order a pool?"

"BA, you're right - I had a feasibility study done years ago by a friend of my who's a State geologist. He suggested a community pool/sauna/Jacuzzi would be a good use for the waste heat, you can't exactly inject 100 degree water back into the ground. It has to be below 80 degrees for the hydrothermal system to work properly."

"Ok, there's still the cost of the building and the pool."

"I know - I was going to contribute \$200K to the cause, but it seems the costs were lower than I thought, and it will only cost \$100K."

"Bill, I had an idea - do you remember reading an article in Mother Earth News about

aquiculture and greenhouses. If I remember correctly, they said the ideal water temperature for Tilapia is around 80 degrees Fahrenheit, the waste water coming out of the pool would be just about right.”

“Ok, Ron, but one slight problem, the water in the pool will be chlorinated, or the Health Department will have a cow.”

“How about diverting some hot water before the pool/Jacuzzi and blending it with cold water until it’s 80 degrees? We could build a huge greenhouse and grow vegetables year round, including stuff we can’t grow now like corn. If the fuel prices are going sky-high, then commercial canned food and fresh meat will either be expensive or unavailable.”

“Yikes, I never thought about that - we better tell any mothers with babies to stock up, and we had better stock up on anything we need to bring in from outside like soap, paper products and everything else - guess we better make a list and start buying stuff. Ron, BA - we might need some more money to buy stuff and store it. Since you’re the only ones with that kind of money, you’re nominated. Power is kind of useless if you can’t eat, wash clothes or anything else.”

Ron turned to BA and said “Looks like we’re going into the General Store business.”

BA suggested to Bill that they call a town meeting to discuss the problem. Meanwhile he saw no reason not to put their plans into action.

Bill spread the word, and everyone in town gathered at the Moose Café. It was crowded but they all fit. Bill called the meeting to order.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, We’ve heard some disturbing news you need to know about. Several highly placed sources in the military and government have heard that there is a very good possibility of a coup in Saudi Arabia. If it is successful, they have threatened to cut off the oil to the west. Even if it is unsuccessful, it would mean doubling or tripling fuel costs due the unrest. Everyone’s livelihoods and very lives are dependant on cheap fuel up here. Even if you’re a primitive homesteader, you still have goods delivered by plane. What Bill Avery and Ron have proposed is to stockpile enough supplies to keep us living for 5 years, and they have offered to build, install, and run a geothermal generating station capable of producing 10 Megawatts of power cheaply. They are paying for it out of their own pockets, and all they are asking is those of you who can afford it, to pay monthly bills that would reimburse them for their expenses over 30 years, including their start up costs, and the cost of rebuilding the generator as needed. This would cut your existing power costs in half, and also provide several things, including a community 25-meter swimming pool, a 50x50 Jacuzzi and a sauna/steam room. The extra heat will also keep a huge community greenhouse working year round with a combination of vegetables and a Tilapia aquiculture setup. Anything you used to buy from Anchorage or elsewhere will shortly either have to be stockpiled or produced here, or do without. I’m passing around papers and pencils. You need to list what you’d need to live fairly

comfortably for a year, and we will tabulate and correlate the lists, then extrapolate them out to 5 years, and stockpile it. Ron and BA have something very important to add.”

Ron spoke up. “These items will not be free, we will charge fair market value for them, at the prices we paid when we bought them. Those of you with outside incomes that can afford to pay cash - we would appreciate it. Those of you who will be probably unemployed by then will be offered jobs at Allakaket Airlines to earn sufficient funds to afford supplies. Those too elderly or infirm to work, we will support you, and make sure you are safe and taken care of. Any questions?”

A lady in the back stood up, “How sure are you?”

“Ma’am, nothing is sure but death and taxes. In either event, we are proceeding with our plans. If we are wrong, you’ll still have jobs, and a local supply of goods to purchase at the same cost as before. We plan on hiring the storekeeper so she won’t be out of a job. We are ordering a huge supply of fuel to store in case. We feel strongly enough about this to be spending \$5 Million each on plans to get us through this crisis. With your help, we can make it.”

Bill spoke up again, “Friends, let’s not panic here, or start a panic by spreading word far and wide, that would start the very panic we are hoping to prevent. We have over a year according to our sources before this crisis could erupt, which gives us plenty of time to stockpile and prepare. Any other questions?”

“What about friends and relatives - what should we tell them?”

“Good question, Tell them to prepare and stockpile, but don’t panic. Treat it like any other Civil Emergency, it’s just this time we have some advance warning. Please don’t go spreading wild rumors, or you’ll only be making things worse.”

When the meeting broke up, Bill reminded BA and Ron that they would need a huge building to store all this stuff in. Bill thought he could contact that Steel Building manufacturer in Anchorage and ask him if he had a 3rd building in stock, since if they were building 2 they might as well build 3 the same size and get a better price. BA figured the building was twice as big as they needed, but better too much than too little.

Between flying passengers, freight and stuff they were stocking up on, Ron was busier than he had ever been in his life. Both his TG’s were flying non-stop 6 days a week. The Chinook pilot was working like a madman, but wasn’t complaining since he was getting major overtime, and the community needed what he was flying. It wasn’t like he was flying prime old-growth timber from the forests to the ports for export to Japan; he was flying essential materials into the town. As soon as Bear and Hunter were finished with the backhoe, Jim flew it to Allakaket and they got started earthmoving and blasting. Hunter was as good as he said, and never overshot or undershot by much. In 6 weeks, they had the holes for the tanks dug, and Jim flew to

Anchorage then flew back with a huge fuel tank slung under his chopper. He did that 6 times, then the fuel delivery company started flying non-stop fuel deliveries to fill those massive tanks. Jim flew components of a concrete batch plant that could make concrete and gunite to Allakaket, then flew huge pallets full of concrete mix and gunite mix., then a concrete truck, and a concrete pump, and a gunite sprayer. He carried the turbogenerator, the pipes and the controls in separate flights. By the time he had finished, they had erected 3 huge buildings and had assembled the geothermal power plant.

The pool had to wait for the first 2 buildings to get done, since they were taking the full capacity of the plant to make their floors, which had to be extra-thick and heavily reinforced to prevent heaving and cracking in the Alaskan winter. Once the power plant was up and running, Bill started filling the pool. There was enough hot water left over to heat all 3 buildings, the Inn, the hangars, and provide enough heat and hot water for a 40,000 square foot greenhouse with several Tilapia tanks that had hundreds of Tilapia fry. Once they were big enough, they'd sort them into Male and Female, and keep them in separate tanks, except for breeding purposes.

The idea was hot water entered the tank, kept the water at 80 degrees, then went into the hydroponic tanks where all kinds of produce was grown including exotic varieties that would never grow in Alaska. The natural sunlight was supplemented by banks of florescent lights. Bill had read that if you combined a 48-inch cool florescent tube with a 48-inch warm florescent tube in the same rack, you approximated normal sunlight for a tenth of the cost of incandescent grow lights, between buying and running them. The light fixtures were raised and lowered as the plants grew to keep them at the correct distance from the plants. They bought cases of bulbs, fixtures and ballasts, and cases of Non-hybrid seeds. Ron wished they would have shipped the liquid fish emulsion as a sling load under the Chinook, but it came with the rest of the stuff instead. It took a week to get the smell out of the plane. Finally, right before winter they were done, and Ron took a week off to relax and spend time with Nancy and Moose, who was getting huge. Moose had gained 30 pounds in his first year, and was definitely living up to his name. Ron loved playing with him, but Moose really got attached to Nancy.

Bear had a very busy season, and made Ron another half-million in profits not including the extra money spent flying. This offset the half-mil he gave Bear, so he was happy. Ron flew up to their compound, and Bear took him for a hike to show him something. 2 hours later he was looking inside the mine that Slim's family had started in the 1800's. Bear explained what he was looking at in the powerful lights, and took a sample. Ron flew it to Anchorage to an assayer, who told Ron he had located some high-grade gold ore, but it was very small particles. Ron did some checking and located used mining equipment, laid-off miners, and hired townspeople as their business shut down as word spread of the pending crisis. Ron was glad they had secured all the fuel they would need for several years, and were 100% energy independent, and had stockpiled 5 years worth of staples, fabric, paper products, and other necessities. The storekeeper had so much stuff she needed a computer to track all of it.

As the first of the year got closer, the crisis deepened. The Saudi Royal Family was losing control, and CNN speculated that they were looking for a country to bug out to. When

Germany agreed to take them, they left the kingdom, and took their wealth with them, leaving the once great nation destitute and at the mercy of its neighbors. Arabic memories make the Europeans seem like amnesiacs, and several of their neighbors used this opportunity to settle old scores, and reclaim territory. The entire region destabilized, and no one was capable of safely delivering the massive amounts of crude oil necessary to keep the rest of the world running. The UN attempted to arbitrarily settle the issue, as the European powers had done centuries before. The effort was doomed from the start, since the UN had no military, and the various European nations were fighting each other for control of the region. Finally the US Navy was forced to militarize and organize the Persian Gulf, since pirates and terrorists roamed the waters collecting tribute from the few oil tankers that were able to find sufficient quantities of crude oil to make the trip worth it. The Small Boat Navy was reinvented, since the best defense against a small fast lightly armed boat was a small, fast more heavily armed boat. Thousands of mothballed PT boats were pushed into service. Some were barely seaworthy, and after some disasters caused by obsolete equipment, the Secretary of the Navy was standing in the Oval Office threatening dire consequences unless George Bush got off his duff and signed the Executive Order militarizing the Coast Guard, and authorizing a crash program to build 100 copies of the Mark V boat the SEALs were using. It was perfect for coastal defensive operations, yet some Idiot at the Pentagon never authorized a large purchase, probably because JSOC had bypassed NAVSEA in the procurement process for the ones he did get. The Secretary had spoken to General Shepard, who told the Secretary that he bypassed NAVSEA because the last time they had an original idea a Cutter was a sailing ship, and they were a dumb plodding bureaucratic SNAFU waiting to take an original idea and FUBAR it. The Secretary agreed, but the only fast way around NAVSEA was an EO, but George was reticent to sign an EO for a huge order for a new ship, when an aide stepped into the office, turned on CNN and showed another bunch of pirates hijacking an oil tanker, and beheading a member of the crew. George ordered the TV turned off. He asked the Secretary how ordering 100 Mark V boats would stop this.

“Mr. President, our destroyers can escort a convoy of tankers, but they can’t be everywhere at once, and these pirates sneak up while the destroyers are off chasing someone else, and capture the tanker. Once they have the tanker, they rig it with explosives and threaten to blow it out of the water unless they are paid off. The Mark V has a top speed over 50 knots, and can accelerate to that speed in a matter of seconds. It has a 25mm autocannon in the bow, and a 7,62mm GE Minigun in the stern, plus it can carry several 6 man SEAL teams and their equipment. That’s a lot of firepower in a small boat. The destroyers we are using are WWII technology, top out at about 30 knots, and can’t keep up with the pirate’s boats. The plan is to let the destroyers escort the convoys while the Mark V’s roam the likely areas where the pirates hide, and damage or destroy their boats before they can attack the tankers.”

The Secretary knew that GW loved Special Forces, so he made sure to include that element in his argument. The President signed the EO, and the boat manufacturer received a rush order for 100 Mark V’s. They had 20 unsold units in stock, and they immediately delivered them to the US Navy for outfitting and arming. As soon as they were ready to go, they were packed aboard

C-5 Galaxies and flown to Diego Garcia. The huge guns on the 20 boats had a telling effect, and piracy slowed to a crawl, but didn't solve the basic problem of supplying the world's oil. Since the US was the only viable armed force in the vicinity, the UN authorized the Marines to secure the refineries and oil fields. Any funds for oil would be deposited in an UN administered trust fund. Slowly over a period of 2 years oil deliveries approached 80 % of normal, but there was still a huge shortfall. Finally the Environmentalists woke up to reality when they discovered their 50mpg econoboxes still needed oil to run, and allowed GW to re-open closed sections of the Alaskan oilfields. This meant an immediate need for cargo planes to fly men and equipment to the oil fields, and Jim was busy again choppering in equipment. Even BA got in the act with his Catalina, flying a long round trip once a week. For the money that the oil companies were offering, and the huge savings in fuel promised, it was worth it. Since they had an oil field contract, Allakaket Airlines had access to and pre-crisis pricing on any available fuel, and Ron took advantage of the situation, and refilled all their fuel tanks in case fuel supplies were disrupted again. Their contracts with the oil companies, and the gold they were mining quickly refilled the coffers of Allakaket Airlines, and he was soon back in the black. The geothermal power plant was making enough power for the entire town, and had to be throttled back to avoid overproduction. Several oil companies decided to locate offices in Allakaket due to the improved infrastructure, and soon the power plant was back up to 80% of capacity. The Greenhouse was a co-op, and people earned vegetables and meat by working at the co-op greenhouse or other projects. Inn guests were amazed that they could serve fresh corn on the cob in the middle of winter.

Chapter 9 -Just getting by

Things did not bode well for Allakaket Airlines. GW was now a lame duck President, and the Republicans didn't have anyone decent to run. Kerry was still eager to become the next president, but he was afraid Hillary Clinton would throw her broom into the ring. The oil supply never really stabilized, and Congress did what it was best at, talking the problem to death. There were millions of people eager to point fingers, and very few with real solutions. We weren't out of oil; it's just that politics made it difficult to secure our oil sources. Most Right Wing Republicans said we should annex Saudi Arabia, kick the towel heads out, and pump it dry. Others blamed the oil companies and there was a mad scramble for any quick-fix, until some smart person pointed out that electric cars were powered by electricity generated by either coal or oil fired generators, and hydroelectric only provided a small percentage of our power. The Democrats were in a jam as well, since the only viable alternative to replace oil was Nuclear power, and they hated Nuclear power even more than Big Oil!

Allakaket Airlines was still in business, except now they were flying and training Survivalists who thought the end was near. Bear was just glad to have the clientele even if they reminded him of a cross between Rambo and Walter Mitty. The hunters couldn't afford flights that cost 3 times what they cost before, but for some reason everyone who could afford it, or even had to mortgage the house to afford it was signing up for Alaska Survival Inc.'s Survival school. Since foodstuffs and supplies were available, Ron and BA were plowing all their money back into keeping their store stocked. Their gold mine was profitable, and with some equipment borrowed from nearby oil fields, they were able to transport the ore down the hill to their smelting and processing facility. Gold was so valuable that they could afford to fly in several tankers a week full of diesel and fuel oil for their equipment and generators. They had a small hydroelectric system from damming a river, but the bulk of their power was generated by fuel oil powered steam generators. They would have killed for a geothermal hot spot, but the geologist said it was too deep to take advantage of. They were as energy efficient as possible, and took full advantage of the short summers to make photoelectric power, but it was ridiculously expensive compared to even the high price of diesel and fuel oil. They installed a huge heliostat, but it only ran 6 months out of the year, and had to be repaired each year due to winter damage. Even with their astronomical cost of doing business, with gold over \$2,000 per ounce, they were making money hand over fist, and had managed to employ most of the townspeople who were unemployed due to the energy crisis.

Finally, Nancy was pregnant. She announced the good news to Ron when he came home from work after fixing an extravagant dinner, and giving him a massage. Finally she sat down and told him. He didn't ask "How'd that happen?" since they had been trying for a while. Ron walked to this wife, gave her a big hug, and cried. She was wondering what he was crying for, when Ron told her he thought that he might be sterile. She told him that she saw the Doc, who switched her prescriptions for her asthma and gave her some different vitamins, and voila! 9 months from now, they would be parents. Nancy had sworn Anne to secrecy, but now she was

sure to get in some quality Girl Time with her mother-in-law. Nancy really liked Anne, and liked the way she gave advice. She never said “If I were you” or pontificated. They just talked like Nancy was her daughter.

Things were heating up in the Middle East, with various Radical Mullahs stirring up the people and claiming they weren’t getting the income from the oil production when in reality, they were getting 2-3 times more of the money than when the Royal Family was in power. GW had made some inquiries about seizing the assets of the Royal Family when he heard how much money they had absconded with. Problem was he didn’t have a legal leg to stand on. It seems that ripping off the citizens of your country and absconding with the loot wasn’t illegal, and they had no jurisdiction anyway. The UN refused to act, surprising no one. Ron took a rare break to fly up to check on Bear and their operation. Ron was getting worried about security, and Bear assured him that it was taken care of to a level he would never believe, or needed to know about. Ron and BA, and most of the people in the town who could afford to placed a huge group order for ammo. The load was so heavy the BA and Ron had to fly the Catalina to Anchorage to pick it up. The delivery driver decided to deliver it in a huge cube van with a lift tail instead of making 4 trips in his usual truck. BA’s Catalina had been highly modified from the original and thoroughly de-milled. The Waist Gunner’s compartment had been replaced by a huge door, and they were able to easily transfer the pallets from the truck to the plane. They located the pallets along the centerline of the plane for safety reasons, and tried to balance the load front and rear. Tying the pallets down was overkill, but you never knew when you might be forced to execute a negative-g maneuver to save the plane. BA performed a very gentle take-off, and didn’t try to climb much or climb fast. He set the PBY down on Allakaket Lake as if he had a load full of nitroglycerine and taxied to the ramp. Once they were stopped, the townspeople helped them unload case by case, forming a human chain to handle the heavy load. They loaded it into several pickups and delivered it that afternoon. Most of the townspeople had ordered a case of their favorite ammo. BA finally realized that guns had more uses than just hunting, and had bought several. With small kids in the house, they were either on his person, or in the safe. Ron had convinced him of the necessity of carrying at least a .45 everywhere he went, so he bought a Para Ordinance P-14 Limited like Ron’s and learned to shoot fairly well with it. He finally stopped wearing suits, and realized jeans and flannel shirts were much more comfortable. Ron bought him a Bladetech IWB holster and a double-mag carrier to match.

The next morning BA was watching the news on his Satellite TV when the feed was suddenly cut from CNN in New York. He tried the other channels, and all he got was an EBS out of Anchorage with no further info. He called Ron and gave him the news. He started searching the internet, and finally Reuters broke the news 2 hours later that several small nuclear explosions had gone off in the business districts of New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. There were hundreds of thousands of fatalities, but the real damage appeared to be to the financial centers themselves. Al Quaeda took credit for the attacks, stating they had destroyed the Great Satan once and for all. What they didn’t know was the effects would be temporary due to what was known as real-time data back-ups. Millions of people in the United States

panicked, thinking the banking system was wiped out. The first thing GW did was get the networks back on line so he could tell the people that everything was OK, and their money was safe, it would just take a couple of weeks to restore all the backed up data.

The oil company executives weren't convinced, and demanded to be flown back to Anchorage later that day. Ron hoped they wouldn't come back, since they had been disruptive as soon as they moved in, and BA was tempted to resume his Socialite ways until Sally put her foot down, and that was that.

Two weeks later, the banks were open as GW had promised, and he had located a probable target for retaliation. This time he wanted Congress's backing, so he called an emergency closed door secret session of Congress, and barred cameras and reporters.

Later that day, he addressed Congress:

"Ladies and Gentlemen of Congress, we have been deliberately attacked by an old enemy who had attempted to destroy our financial systems. Luckily for us, they didn't really understand our systems were fully redundant, and they would have to destroy the back-ups, and the backups to the backups to cause the financial crisis they were attempting to foment. They did cause us some losses, including several million dead from the demolition of the buildings, radiation, and accidents caused by the panic attempting to flee. They caused at least 10 million injuries, some severe, and they caused us Billions of dollars in damage. I called this secret emergency session, because what I'm about to reveal may never leave this room, but I need your support for several retaliatory strikes.

First of all the Saudi Royal Family has supported Al Quaeda since before the first Desert Storm, and I'm passing out documents that prove that. All copies have been numbered, and must be returned before the doors are opened. The Saudi Royal Family has absconded to Germany with over half a Trillion dollars of stolen oil revenue. What I plan on doing is to seize all their assets by blocking transactions of the affected banks until they agree to return the ill gotten gain to its rightful owner, after we take 20% of it as payment for the damages caused by the attack they paid for. All of our percentage of the funds will be disbursed to actual victims with legitimate claims, and NO lawyer's fees will be paid out of these funds. I don't want 2/3 of the money going to a bunch of people who weren't victims of this attack, but still benefit financially. Our first priority will be to rebuild downtown New York, Chicago, and Los Angeles. Since the Insurance Companies have invoked their "Acts of War" clause, no one has been able to rebuild. Once the United States had paid for the losses and rebuilding expenses of big companies, I'll sign an Executive Order declaring this a Terrorist Attack, and basically order the insurance companies to make good on the smaller losses by rate payers who paid their money all these years, expecting the insurance company to actually pay for a loss, and not run and hide behind an obscure definition of an "Act of War".

Second of all, we have several locations that we're pretty sure belong to Al Quaeda or

sympathizers and major supporters based on intercepts in the days before and after the attacks. Any of you who breathe a word of this will face a National Security Act arrest.

Therefore, I've ordered all of our precision bombers to load up with JDAMs and fly to these targets. They are in the air now, but I want a voice vote of approval for these strikes because there might be repercussions. The United States cannot be attacked and then seen as weak by the world, or the sharks will close in, and the vultures will be there to pick off the scraps. My final act as President of the United States will not be to sign our surrender to terrorists. Every time the United States was attacked, like in Pearl Harbor, we counterattacked and defeated that enemy. There are those of you who want to appease all our enemies. I'm here to remind you that Neville handed Churchill a peace treaty signed by Adolf Hitler the same moment the Battle of Britain started. Appeasement never worked, and never will. Now I'm asking for a voice vote to approve the actions we as a nation are about to take. Our Nation has been attacked, and our response is measured and responsible, and aimed at those who attacked us, not innocent civilians."

Dick Cheney, as the President of the Senate, called for a voice vote. Except for a few Ultra-Liberal members of Congress, it was an overwhelming majority and almost unanimous in their approval of his actions. GW knew that offering to fix NYC and Chicago had silenced most of his critics, since they realized it was a package deal. George walked over to a desk, and signed the EO authorizing the missions, and a hundreds of bombers that were orbiting just outside of radar range of their targets were given the GO code, and all over the Middle East it was raining JDAMS. Some were laser drops due to the proximity of civilians, and some were GPS drops. An hour later, every known member or supporter of Al Qaeda, including all the pesky radical Mullahs had a suddenly unexpected encounter with God. All over the world, transactions were frozen for entire banks that the US suspected of harboring Saudi Royal Family loot. After a week, the presidents of the banks realized they could not operate at all with all their transactions blocked, and sent private notes to the US government asking why they were being blocked, and what they had to do to resume transactions. The US reply was an encrypted transmission listing all the deposits in their banks that must be surrendered to the US government as stolen property. Most European banks complied immediately, but some Bahamian banks needed more persuasion. The US government got its way when they threatened to send the US Marines in and seize the bank and the entire country if necessary. No Bahamian government could stand for a minute against even a small detachment of Marines, so they knuckled under.

The next day King Faud was rudely awakened by German GS-9 troops sent by the government to evict him from his villa, and seize every asset in his possession. His greatest indignation was when they seized all his Mercedes limousines, and he was forced to walk through the gates of his villa into the clutches of the media. Seems the Germans weren't too happy about having several German banks' transactions blocked, and decided to evict the cause of their grief. Since no other EU nation wanted him, and the Saudis were seeking extradition, the German Government took the easy way out and declared the King and his entire entourage Persona Non Grata and deported them back to Saudi Arabia. They even made him fly commercial. His

entire entourage was arrested upon landing in Saudi Arabia.

George Bush and the senior members of Congress held a joint news conference announcing the seizure of \$500 Billion is Saudi Royal Families assets, and the return of the bulk of those assets directly to the Saudi people to rebuild their infrastructure, open schools, rebuild mosques damaged in the recent Civil War, and generally make life better for the average Saudi citizen. 20% of the money was being withheld to rebuild damages to New York City, Chicago, and Los Angeles, since we had evidence the Saudi Royal Family had financially supported Al Qaeda for decades, and Al Qaeda had claimed responsibility for the bombs.

Overnight GW's popularity soared in the polls, and if he could have run for a 3rd term, he would have won by a landslide. Seeing the polls, the Democrats decided now was not a good time to attack GW, and a Republican, fiscally conservative Congress and a moderate Republican were elected in 2008. His first act as President was to strengthen border security, and erect a fence between Mexico and the US, and deport all Illegal Aliens, with liberal amnesty for any illegals who had lived here over 10 years, and could prove it, and could pass a NCIC background check. The amnesty clause kept most of the Mexican voters from rebelling, and the Wall was erected. Within months, hospitals in border states reported a huge drop in number of deliveries, and Emergency Room admittances.

King Faud spent his last days in a common prison cell near "Chop Square" in Riyadh. The irony of the situation was not lost on the king, since he could see his palace out of his prison window. His execution was a foregone conclusion. Theft on that scale warranted death according to Islamic Law. What the Supreme Council debated for months was how far the executions should spread. Several Imams wanted to execute the entire entourage, and some wanted to free anyone who wasn't a member of the Royal Family. A brilliant compromise was reached. Anyone in direct line for the throne would be executed to prevent retaliation if they should ascend the throne, the others would face a decision of execution or publicly denying their royalty and throwing their badges of royalty on a dung heap before the TV cameras. They knew this would result in forever destroying the monarchy, and frankly they were tired of the excesses and some embarrassingly public displays of behavior forbidden by the Koran from younger members of the Royal Family.

King Faud was delivered the news that he would be executed the next day and a note from Ex-President Bush at the same time. Since the King read English, it was left un-translated and unopened.

Dear King Faud:

If you hadn't been so greedy you would still be in Germany today living a life of luxury instead of facing execution. If you would have kept it under \$10 Billion, we could have looked the other way, but absconding with over \$500 Billion and taking all your country's liquid assets was too much, and we had to bring you to heel.

Enjoy Eternity!

George Bush

The next day at high noon, dozens of members of the Royal family were chained together as common criminals, and forced to walk to Chop Square in the blazing 100 degree plus heat. A cleric was provided, but none were willing to confess. The King was the first one in line, and before he was executed, he was publicly humiliated by being stripped of his throbe and regalia and was executed as a common thief. He nearly fainted when he saw the huge razor sharp scimitar wielded by the Executioner. He was tied to the block, and as the blade descended a roar erupted from the crowd "Allah Akbar" and the King's head rolled away from his body. That day was henceforth celebrated as Saudi Independence day.

The next day there was a big ceremony carried live on Saudi TV and broadcast to the world of the cousins of the royal family throwing their regalia and throbes onto a dung heap and publicly renouncing any ties to the Royal Family.

Over the weeks and months under pressure from the US and Britain, the Saudis adopted a British-modeled government, with the upper house dominated by the clergy, and the lower house dominated by the new middle class of entrepreneurs. It was an eclectic blend of Islamic Law and a Civil Government.

Ron and BA followed all this, and realized the US had just bought some time, that any remaining members of Al Qaeda would be back seeking revenge. They hoped that the measures President Hatch had taken would keep them out of the United States.

Chapter 10 - Al Quaeda

Unfortunately GW didn't target all the Al Quaeda sympathizers in the Middle East. Most of the Iranian Republican Guard were staunch supporters of Al Quaeda, and when they received news of the JDAM strikes, they were furious, especially when several popular (to them) mullahs were killed along with their families. The Republican guards by themselves had no means of retaliation, but they began the process of rebuilding Al Quaeda, and planning their revenge.

After the strike, oil production in the Middle East and the rest of the world rose sharply. Several news sources attributed it to fears of attack by the United States, but what it was in reality was the re-activating of several thousand wells in Texas and California as the price soared high enough to make them profitable. The glut of oil drove the price of a barrel of crude back under \$50, and they began shutting down again. By now the entire Alaskan oil field was in full production, and the terminal in Valdez Alaska was operating around the clock, transferring oil to new double-hulled supertankers and mega-tankers for delivery to both coasts of the United States. Several US Senators had approached President Hatch with an idea to build a new set of locks next to the original Panama Canal that was 5 times the size of the original, and could take any oil tanker envisioned in the next 20 years. President Hatch looked at the costs of building a canal just for supertankers, the security risks and cost to defend the very valuable and highly vulnerable supertankers while in transit, and told them the bloody tankers could go around, he wasn't spending more than the national debt on a canal just to lower the cost of crude oil by \$2 per barrel. He had also seen secret CIA reports that Latin American Insurgents had plans to attack the existing canal and hold the ships hostage. If they held a supertanker hostage, they would have a real bargaining chip.

He thought about that idea, and decided to put a heavily armed Marine guard force aboard every tanker that left US waters in transit armed to repel boarders and equipped with Stinger Missiles to take out any attempt to board via helicopter. The Commandant of the Marines liked the idea, since the Marines' original job was to protect US ships from pirates, and in a way they would be doing that again. He pointed out to the President that it meant militarizing the vessels, since Posse Comitatus prohibited Military use for civilian law enforcement. President Hatch fixed that with a single EO, and for the duration of the emergency, the US flagged oil tankers would be considered US Military ships under civilian control and ownership. The practical matter was that a Naval Officer would be on the bridge 24/7, but since the Navy Captains weren't experienced with ships that big and unwieldy, the civilian captain made all navigation decisions, and the naval officer was in charge of security. Word soon spread of heavily armed Marines on the Oil tankers, and several Latin American Terrorist organizations decided to pick easier targets. The sight of Ma Deuces on pintle mounts port and starboard, and twin 40mm Bofors guns mounted on the bow and stern became a common sight. They also mounted a military radar system on every supertanker that could detect any object from 0-25 thousand feet within a 50-mile range from the ship that was bigger than a barrel.

With the drop in oil prices, hunters came back to Alaska with a vengeance, hoping that there would be some prime trophy caribou available, since they hadn't been heavily hunted for several years. That season several Boone & Crocket records were established. When word spread, every hunter who could afford it tried to get to Alaska. Alaska Airlines, Allakaket Airlines and the lodges were operating at max capacity. Even the Inn at Allakaket was booked for the entire season by hunters who wanted to hunt by themselves with a guide. Every house and cabin was rented for the season by pilots and guides, and business was booming. Knowing it couldn't last, Bill, BA and Ron socked away all their profits, kept the fuel tanks full, and did everything they could to make sure the entire town would be self-sufficient in case the boom went bust. Nancy delivered her son, named Jake, and Ron was a proud new father. Unlike his dad, he didn't have to deliver his son and good thing too, since he was flying back from Anchorage when he was born. Ron really wanted to be there, but knew he would probably be in the air between Anchorage and Allakaket when it happened. He said "That's OK, I was there for the important part!" and Nancy had to laugh. Since Anne was Doc Miller's nurse, Nancy did have a family member there in the delivery room. 9 months later, she was pregnant again. BA guessed they were in a hurry to get it over with. Actually Ron and Nancy couldn't keep their hands off each other, and the result was additional kids, which was OK with them, since they wanted at least 4. Nancy was a full-time Mom, and loved it. Having 2 kids in diapers would be interesting, but she knew she was up to the challenge. Ron spent as much time home as he could, but she realized that he had a seasonal business to run, and did most of the flying himself. They were now so busy that both TG's flew 2 round-trips between Anchorage and Allakaket each day full of passengers. Sometimes Steve flew a 3rd trip for cargo. BA was glad he switched to Ron's business manager, because he was sure he would be going out of his tree trying to manage Alaska Airlines since he was working between 40 and 60 hours each week just taking care of Allakaket Airlines and their subsidiaries. The gold mine was at full production during the warm season, and was making enough money that the airlines could have shut down and the entire company would still be in the black. Ron took advantage of the situation and ordered more fuel tanks installed at Allakaket and at the mine site. Jim was as busy as anyone else flying his CH-47. The mine would have a 6-month supply of fuel on hand when they finished, and the airport at Allakaket would have a year's supply for the airline and the town. Since the geothermal plant was producing between 4 and 5 megawatts each day, the demand for diesel generators was just about zero, but everyone had switched over to diesel vehicles at Ron's suggestion, since the diesel was easier to store long-term than the avgas. The snowmobiles and chainsaws still used avgas, as well as the bush planes, but in an emergency they could do without them. They had millions of gallons of JP-5 in storage, easily enough to last a year at their current rate of use, and if they cut back, it would last several years. The Survival school was still going like gangbusters between new Fed and LEO customers, and the occasional civilian with \$5K to spend learning survival for a week in the Alaskan wilderness. Bear and Hunter still ran the Survival Business, and Ron hired a full-time mine manager with seasonal crew for the warmer months, and a year-round maintenance crew that lived at the mine site to keep it up during the winter shut-down. The seasonal crew made so much money during the warm season that they didn't have to work the rest of the year, which suited them just fine. Several bought cabins in the area around Allakaket and moved their families to Alaska since

they knew that it was just matter of time before TSHTF again.

Al Quaeda and the Republican Guard were in the process of planning their attack on the oil pipeline. They realized infiltrating the US would be next to impossible via Mexico, so they checked Canada out, and it was wide open. Toronto would let anyone in, and there were no travel restrictions. Their only difficulty would be getting from the Yukon Territory to the oil pipeline. They would have to fly, and started training pilots and looking for planes. The area was snow-bound almost year-round, so they needed a ski plane, and winter survival training for the operatives. Several of them applied to Alaska Survival Inc, and Bear refused their applications, and forwarded the info to Homeland Security. He hoped the HSD was better run than when Bush was President, or they were in deep kimchee. The rejected applications and the requests for background clearances for new pilot training went to separate desks, so no one put 2 and 2 together until much later.

Luckily, applications for pilot training for anyone of Middle-eastern descent were automatically denied unless they were Israeli, setting their plans back over a year while they scrambled for another training site. Finally they located a French company that didn't give a rip what nationality their students were, just the color of their money. Many 3rd world pilots received their training there, as did many potential terrorists. The French didn't see terrorism as a French problem yet, since they were so busy appeasing the terrorists that they hadn't bothered to attack yet. 2 years later their pilots were given Commercial tickets with multi-engine ratings, and began searching for planes. They knew that C-130's flew around and near the Arctic Circle year-round, and could carry a bunch of gear, including the plastic explosive charges they would need to sever the oil pipeline. The easiest solution came from a mole in the RCAF who said they could just steal a winter-equipped RCAF C-130. By the time they missed it, the mission would be accomplished. They decided to skip the survival training since this would be a one-way mission anyway, and make up the time they lost trying to find pilot training facilities in the US or Canada.

Bear was hearing rumblings through the grapevine that Al Quaeda was up to no good, and it would involve an attack on the US. He e-mailed a friend of his at HSD and asked him if they ever investigated the applications for Survival Training. When he said they didn't, Bear gave them the names, and they came up on a hot sheet, which immediately got the HSD working on cold-environment attacks. They issued alerts to all cold-weather military bases, and just through dumb luck, a copy filtered down to the people responsible for the Trans-Alaska pipeline, and they immediately increased their security patrols, and changed their weapons from AR-15's to M-1a's. They increased the frequency of radio checks as well, and since the checks were for the benefit of the guards, they actually appreciated it. By the time Al Quaeda was ready to attack, the alert had expired, but being creatures of habit, the pipeline company never stood down the extra security along the pipeline.

Several weeks later Al Quaeda infiltrated Toronto International and breezed through the non-existent security with false passports. They drove west to the Yukon Territory to a base that

was close to the border with Alaska, scouted it for a few days to establish the guard's pattern, and snuck up to him and killed him, hiding the body where it would take weeks to be found. The mole had already ID'd the plane they needed to steal. It was already fully fueled and prepped for a mission that was mysteriously cancelled later that afternoon. They stole the plane, took off and flew below the radar until they reached the pipeline. The pilot didn't land the plane as smoothly as he had practiced, probably since he had been up for 18 hours, and snow viewed in the early morning light looks deceptively flat. No one was seriously injured, but they were forced to abandon their schedule. Unknown to the attackers, the schedule was set to ensure that no guards would be near the sections they were going to blow. Their delay meant that guards would be either nearby or right on top of the sections they were to blow up.

They made it to the sections OK, but while they were placing the explosives, the guards appeared, and realized there was no scheduled maintenance on this section of pipe, radioed in the Attack Alert, and jumped out of their trucks and sought cover. In their white coveralls, they blended right into the snow. Through their binoculars they could see the terrorists were fixing explosives, and they had no time to waste. They sighted on the terrorists with the scoped M-1a's and commenced fire. Hearing gunshots, the leaders pressed the detonators while they could. Since the charges weren't fully placed, the pipes were severely damaged enough to force a shut-down, but not ruptured as the terrorists had hoped. All up and down the line, the Security force went on high alert, and 6-man Strike teams were sent to the pipes while they checked the remainder. When the smoke cleared, it was apparent there were only 2 teams of terrorists, and they quickly backtracked and located their plane. They notified the RCAF that they were missing a C-130, and RCAF checked and thought the guard had deserted his post until they found the guard's body a week later. The news that the pipeline had been attacked made it up the chain of command, resulting in a Flash message being put in the hands of President Hatch. While he was grateful that the pipeline had survived and was intact, he was so mad that he could have nuked the entire Middle East right then and there.

President Hatch was given continuous updates. When they found and translated papers found at the crash site and several of the bodies were ID'd then ran through the system, and their nationality was known, President Hatch vowed to finish what President Bush started. Before he could do anything rash (Like nuke the entire Middle East) his Chief of Staff had a word with him, and suggested a much better solution. Like his predecessor, he would address Congress, and then drop a MOAB on Tehran. Several were based in Diego Garcia, and he authorized the loading and readying of the plane. He called an immediate closed joint session of Congress, and gave them the news. Most of the Ultra-Conservative Republicans and several conservative Democrats wanted to nuke Iran and get it over with. President Hatch agreed, that was his first solution, then told them his Chief of Staff suggested a much better solution that would do as much damage as a small nuke without the radioactive or political fallout.

"Ladies and Gentlemen, the solution he came up with was to drop a MOAB on Tehran Iran. I have the appropriate plane being loaded as we speak, and I need a voice vote authorizing the attack." Since the Ultra-Liberal wing of the Democratic Party found themselves without a constituency, and out of office; the vote was unanimous, and President Hatch signed the order.

The C-130 with a heavy fighter escort and a fuel tanker took off, and later that afternoon, a single huge bomb rolled out of the C-130 and fell to earth. Just above ground, the detonator fired, and 18 Thousand pounds of TNT turned Tehran into a wasteland.

President Hatch went on National TV right after the attack to break the news to the American Public.

“Ladies and Gentlemen, it seemed Al Quaeda didn’t get the message the first time and tried unsuccessfully to attack our oil pipeline in Alaska resulting in minor damage. From what we know, the Terrorists received primary pilot training from a French company, stole a RCAF C-130, killed the guard, and flew below radar coverage to the pipeline, where they crash landed. The landing threw off their schedule, and they ran into the guard force, which prevented them from setting their charges and blowing the pipeline. Subsequent forensic testing and documents found at the crash site and on the bodies proved beyond a reasonable doubt that this branch of Al Quaeda had close ties to the Iranian Republican Guards. Between that and evidence the Iranian government is going forward with their illegal nuclear weapons program, I would have been justified to nuke the entire country. Instead I decided to show mercy and drop a 20,000 pound MOAB on Tehran. Right now the entire city of Tehran is as flat as a pancake. I have a message for the rest of the Moslems in the world. We can be the best of friends, or the worst of enemies. It’s your choice - Attack America again, or American interests or citizens again, and you will reap the whirlwind. Consider this your final warning.”

Ron and Nancy were watching the TV, and caught the President’s speech. They turned the TV off when the talking heads came on and babbled for an hour. Ron turned to Nancy and said “He’s definitely got a set of brass ones!”

“Ron, it also might invite other attacks!”

“I doubt it - I’m pretty sure the next attack if there is one, will generate a nuclear response. No government in their right minds would allow anyone to encourage the US to nuke their entire country. They’ll rein their terrorist organizations in fast. Some might even ask for US help, and I’m sure we’ll give it. That message wasn’t just for the Moslems - it was meant for every country in the world that wishes us ill, or covets what we have. As long as Hatch is President, even Russia and China will watch where they step.”

Chapter 11 - Moose on the Loose

By now Moose had grown from a small puppy into a medium-sized Moose and decided to help Nancy baby-sit Jake, sometimes literally. More than once, Nancy walked into a room and found Moose sitting on Jake. Since he was still breathing she didn't freak out. Jake made up for it by using Moose as a Jungle Gym. The two of them got along great, and Moose kept Jake out of trouble more than once by woofing and ratting out Jake when he was doing stuff like trying to climb over the baby barricade. They played together, napped together, and Nancy even caught Jake trying to drink out of Moose's water bowl. She thought that was a little too much togetherness, and put the kibosh on that. Often during naptime, she'd find Jake curled up with Moose on Moose's bearskin rug on the floor. Ron was home one day and spotted them, and almost broke down in tears remembering when he used to do that with his old dog Sam. Nancy picked that moment to give Ron a hug, and she couldn't understand why he was crying so hard. When he finally stopped and explained, she joined him. A couple of months later, Nancy had their second son Josh. Jake was too busy with Moose to miss the intimate time with his mom, so there was little sibling rivalry between the two, at least for now. Nancy was confused, She was a blonde, and Ron had dark hair, yet Jake was a blond, and Josh definitely took after his father. She wondered what a girl would look like.

The next season was busy for Allakaket Airlines as well. BA's replacement had suggested to him that if Allakaket Airlines could pick up the slack, he'd appreciate if they would pick up the Fairbanks to Northern Alaska routes. BA realized that would involve building two new TurboGoose, and he didn't know if they had enough parts available. Ron called the Maintenance Chief at Elmendorf and asked if he could locate some more Allison Turboprops. He suggested Allakaket Airlines contact Allison direct, since if they still had the plans, they could build several of them at the same time, and they would be brand-new turbines, and more reliable than surplus turbines. Ron did just that, and found out that Rolls Royce had bought the company in 1995, and located the Rolls-Royce website for Allison turbines. The e-mail he sent made it quickly to the Director of the Allison Engines Division's desk, and he was incredulous - they thought those turbines had been destroyed long ago. A telephone call to Allakaket verified that not only did the turbines survive, but 4 of them were powering TurboGoose airplanes that had been flying for years. The Director called the head of the Engineering Department, and it took some convincing before his Head Engineer realized that the Director wasn't pulling his leg, and 4 of their old turbines were flying in commercial aircraft. He located the 70-yr old engine designer in a retirement home and the two of them convinced the designer of the turbine that it was installed and running in an aircraft. They immediately booked passage to Anchorage, and met Ron at the airport with one of his TurboGoose aircraft. It took hours for Ron to explain the parentage of the aircraft and turbines, and the designer practically cried when he saw that his beautiful babies were actually installed in a commercial aircraft. Ron invited them aboard, and offered the designer the right seat. The flight back to Allakaket was a very emotional experience all around. The engineer marveled that these 50-year old turbines were still good enough to fly in a commercial aircraft. He was impressed by their power and how

quiet they were. The landing at Allakaket was spectacular because Ron showed them the STOL capabilities of the aircraft. The designer saw the sister ship of the TurboGoose, and was speechless. Finally Ron asked him to build some more turbines. Ron thought the designer was going to cry when he asked him. The Director said they could build as many turbines as they needed, at which point Ron called the maintenance chief at the RCAF base and asked him how many flyable Grumman Goose airframes he had in the mothball fleet. He said about half of them could earn an airworthiness certificate with some work, and that was about 20 planes. Ron called the new CEO of Alaska Airlines and told him he had 20 more airframes available for conversion. How many did he want on the Fairbanks to Nome and points north route? He said he needed 4 aircraft because they were flying in and out of there all day long, and 8 flights per day would just about handle the volume. Ron asked "How about winter?"

"Ron with the new exploration and drilling going on up there, I can imagine you could work that route year round, maybe cut back to 2 planes in the winter. It's not like you can't find pilots."

The CEO was right, the Air Force hadn't recovered from the blow dealt to it by Congress and the ex-President, and was still a shadow of its former self. Ron could have his pick of experienced Transport pilots. Ron asked the Director of Allison to make enough turbines for 4 additional aircraft, and enough spare parts to keep the fleet of 6 flying for 20 years. They went into BA's office and hammered out the details while the engineer and designer pored over the turbines and marveled at the installation job the RCAF 19 Wing AMS did. The WWII airframe, the 1950's turbine, and the 21st century avionics were blended seamlessly. The engineer got a few ideas from looking at the installation, talked it over with the designer, and they agreed. They walked into the meeting and gave Ron the good news. "Ron, we can design a turbine using 21st century technology that will fit inside the same space, accept the same mounts and everything, yet has 30% more horsepower, 50% better fuel economy, and is more reliable. The best news is it won't cost you any extra. Matter of fact, we'll make 4 additional turbines at no charge in exchange for the 4 in the planes now, since we'd love to tear them apart and find out why they're still running after all these years."

"Are they still safe to fly?"

"Don't see any reason why not - we'd just like to have them back for testing."

"Well, in that case, make the other 8 turbines first, we'll get those 4 planes in the air, then we'll work on the first 2 during our downtime this winter."

They agreed, and left with a signed contract for the 8 turbines, plus 4 additional at no charge in exchange for the old turbines. The engineer contacted the Maintenance chief at 19 Wing and they discussed some modifications they wanted to make to the planes to bring them up to 21st Century specs, including full computer engine control. The maintenance chief said he would have no problems with the new design, since they worked on the C-130 that uses the same

equipment all the time. The RCAF chief asked the Engineer if they would be interested in the other airframes to retrofit them for use in Canada. He told the Chief if they could find a buyer, that Allison could make enough turbines for the whole fleet.

Since Allison needed 3-4 months to make the turbines, the RCAF Chief had some time to pick out his 4 best airframes and get them ready for the new turbines and avionics. The mechanics stripped them back to the bare frames, replaced the old military fuel tanks with new FAA approved tanks that held 4 times as much fuel and put them back together. They located all the necessary running gear and parts. When the turbines and avionics came in they were very busy indeed. They got the planes finished, painted, and certified in time for the last month of the busy season. Ron took immediate delivery and the 4 new pilots he had hired were flown down to see their new planes. Ron noticed several differences and asked the Maintenance chief about them. "what happened to the pitch control?"

"The engineer called and said the new turbines required the modern prop design. The computer selects the prop pitch based on turbine RPM, airspeed, and a couple of other factors. You still have a fully reversible prop, all you have to do now is idle the turbines, and flip a switch while the turbines are idling, and you have full reverse available. It's much quicker and safer than the manual system."

Ron had to agree with their logic, but he liked having manual control of the plane, then he realized that just that one feature could improve fuel economy 10-20% since it would set the pitch to the most efficient setting automatically. All of the new pilots were ex C-130 pilots and didn't see what the big deal was; the C-130 was way more automated than the old Grumman Goose. Their tanks were filled, and they flew around the base to make sure everything worked, and landed to top off and report any deficiencies. There were a couple of gripes but they were minor, and after they were fixed, Ron signed for the planes, and they flew back to Allakaket. Ron missed Nancy on these long over-water flights, but she was at home with their sons and probably wasn't interested in joining the Mile High club again.

2 months later, they took the 2 older TurboGoose planes out of service for the winter, and flew them to Vancouver, where the mechanics installed the new turbines and controls. When Ron got his old plane back, he noticed the extra power, but still had to fight himself when he wanted to monkey with the pitch control and it wasn't there. The extra horsepower also meant more capacity for loads, and even with 8 passengers, they could safely carry over 1,000 pounds of baggage or cargo in the rear of the craft. Since it was a multi-use plane, it didn't have a bulkhead between the cargo area and the passengers, just a very strong net made of Kevlar and Spectra straps tightly woven together and attached to secure mounting points built into the frame of the aircraft. The new pilots loved the plane, and quickly took advantage of its unique characteristics. The Fairbanks to Nome route was one of their most popular routes, and Ron planned to base his 4 planes in Fairbanks next season, so he called Alaska Air and spoke to the new CEO, Bradley Whinton III.

“Brad, I was wondering about basing 4 of our TurboGoose planes in Fairbanks next year - we’re wasting huge quantities of fuel flying back and forth to Allakaket each day with a basically empty plane.”

“Ron, I agree, and we were just discussing it. I can let you have ramp space next to ours at our terminal, which will save us the cost of transporting luggage from one terminal to the other. I’ll get with BA to discuss costs.”

“Thanks, talk to you later.”

Ron called BA, “BA- Ron, Just talked to Bradley, he’s going to discuss basing our 4 TurboGoose planes in Fairbanks next year, he said something about discussing costs. Make sure you get the best deal possible for us, since we’re sending them a lot of business.”

“You mean he was going to charge us? Why that little Pipsqueak!”

“Easy BA, nothing’s written in stone yet!”

“Except his epitaph if he expects us to pay him to base our planes at Fairbanks next to his - which by the way it will save them Millions!”

“OK BA, be nice - I don’t want his blood all over our carpet!”

BA calmed down just in time for Brad to call.

“BA, it’s Brad, did Ron tell you about his idea to base Allakaket Airlines planes at Fairbanks next to ours?”

“Yeah he mentioned it.”

“We need to talk dollars and cents.”

“Brad, first of all, if you think Allakaket Airlines is going to pay money for ramp space when the agreement will save Alaska Airlines more than double the usual basing fees, you’re nuts!”

“Excuse me Bill, I never said that!”

“Ron said you were going to call to discuss Costs - that sounds to me like you were thinking of charging us. Before you go any further, you better discuss this with the board.”

“OK BA, I’ll do just that!”

Several hours later a very contrite Bradley Whinton III called BA back.

“BA, sorry about the misunderstanding. I talked to the Chairman of the Board, and his kindest comment was “Are You Nuts?” I guess I’ve got more to learn about this business.”

“Bradley, you were my pick as my successor, but don’t let it get to your head. I knew you were competent enough to run things, and I didn’t really want the job anymore. However, if you want my advice from time to time, as long as it isn’t a conflict of interest, feel free to ask me.”

“Thanks BA; Alaska Airlines would be more than happy to base 4 of Allakaket Airlines planes in the ramp spaces next to ours for no charge. You understand you’re still responsible for your own ramp services and fueling. We’ll handle baggage to and from the plane, and ticketing, but you need to hire someone to load, fuel, clean and maintain the aircraft.”

“Brad, what contractor is Alaska Airlines using in Fairbanks for ramp services?”

“The same one we always did - why?”

“I’m going to contact them and see if they’re interested in offering services to Allakaket Airlines, if that’s OK.”

“Sure, I was just about to recommend them.”

“OK Brad, please e-mail a copy of the basing contract to my attention ASAP.”

“OK, I’ll get them there in an hour, Bye BA.”

BA had to laugh, Brad was a predictable little pup - he would always try to pull a fast one, then act all nice-nice when you called him on it!

“Ron - BA, I had a very interesting conversation with Brad. We get the ramp space next to them for free, but we have to provide our own baggage handlers to load the plane, and someone to clean and fuel the planes. I was planning on getting a bid from the company Alaska Airlines uses in Fairbanks - OK, talk to you later.”

Ron was busy between running his business, spending time with his wife and two boys, and getting chores done around the house. He hired the guy who delivered his diesel to help cut wood. Since he was rolling in dough, he could easily afford to hire someone instead of doing it all himself. Between the two of them, they had all the wood cut, split and stacked within a week. Ron was glad for the help, because it would have taken him a month to cut and split 3 cords of wood with the time he had available, and it meant he could spend some more quality time with his family. BA met him several weeks later, and he showed Ron the figures for the 2 months the planes had flown between Fairbanks and Nome. At this rate, the Fairbanks/Nome route would make more money than the Anchorage Route. Ron asked BA if they should send

some more planes to Fairbanks, but BA suggested getting another TG based in Allakaket to act as an emergency relief plane, which would be able to fly unscheduled trips. Ron thought it was an excellent idea, and made arrangements to get a 7th TurboGoose. Ron had insisted that every one of his TurboGoose pilots become trained as an Alaskan Paramedic and it had paid off more than once. All his Bush Pilots were trained to EMT I or II, and the state paid for upgraded medical kits for everyone completing the First Responder or better course. The state was rolling in oil money, and put it to good use instead of squandering it with more luxurious state building and offices. One expense that Ron did agree with was for the entire state to get a brand new computer system so all the far-flung offices could talk to each other via e-mail or VOIP and remote videoconferencing for groups that had to meet face to face to discuss ideas instead of flying. While Ron could have used the business, he felt that the savings would reduce his taxes even further. Bear was slowing down and delegating more and more of the instructing to much younger men, and instead focused on managing the huge business. He didn't like it, but he couldn't keep up with the younger kids anymore. He still taught the parts of the course that didn't require hiking 100 miles a day over mountains and rappelling down cliffs. Mary was glad he did slow down, because their son needed a father, and Bear swore he was going to be around to see this one grow up instead of somewhere in a 3rd World country making the world safe for Democracy. Hunter was still young enough to do most of it, but April managed to keep him around the house more and more lately.

DELTA had sent a contingent to Alaska Survival Inc. for training, and they asked if Ron Williams was available, they had heard the legends as well. Bear called Ron and asked if he wanted to do a shooting demonstration. Ron asked him how long his shooting range was. Bear said they had managed to make it 600 yards long. Ron said that he would bring his Browning, since 600 yards was a chip-shot for the Barretts, and he didn't want to discourage the Delta shooters. The next day he showed up with his Browning in a really slick drag bag that combined a case and a shooting pad, which he had bought from Brigade Quartermaster. Several of the Delta operatives recognized the bag, and knew that either Ron was a well-informed wannabe, or they were in for a shooting demonstration. They walked to the range, and Ron set up while everyone else put on hearing protection. One of the youngest Delta operators was sent down to the targets to put a target up on the 600 yard line. When he got back, Ron was ready to go. He hadn't shot for quite a while, but still flew every couple of months to Elmendorf when he had time to keep in practice. He loaded the rifle, flipped off the covers, and got into a military prone position. Several operators couldn't believe their eyes, no one shot 600 yards military prone unless they were at Camp Perry. Ron doped out the wind, adjusted his scope, and turned to Bear, who gave him a thumbs-up. Ron cycled the action, steadied his breathing, and soon was so in the zone he didn't remember firing 5 times. When the rifle clicked on an empty chamber, he looked back and took off his ear protection then saw and heard an entire group of Delta operators yelling and cheering. Bear had broken out his 100 power spotting scope, and every operator that looked through it was amazed. His entire group was inside the 3" X-ring. The youngest operator was sent to fetch the target, and Bear took out his calipers, and the group measured 2.98" after subtracting the diameter of the bullet. Bear asked Ron to sign his target, and told Ron he would put it in the lodge if it were OK with him. "Sure Bear,

but that's not my best group - One of the Delta people could tell you the group I shot at MacDill when I was 14."

" So what, you shot a .5 MOA group almost 10 years later! And I know you haven't been able to practice as much as you'd liked lately."

Ron signed the target, and put his drag bag back together, then talked to Bear and walked back to his plane - the Delta people had some shooting practice to do, and he had to get back to work. Ron started the plane, and was in Allakaket an hour later. He drove home and spent the rest of the day with Nancy and his two sons. Moose made sure he was greeted properly, and Ron was glad that he wasn't any bigger. Later that evening Ron and Nancy made up for lost time during the busy season. She said "Dear, we still have 3 or 4 bedrooms empty" and he took the hint. The next morning, it started snowing heavily, so Ron decided to work from home, but didn't get much work done. As the weather permitted, he got his chores done, but nothing that couldn't wait until Spring. BA called him at home, and said the 7th TG would be ready in the Spring in time for next season. He thanked BA and went back to bed. The way Nancy was reacting to him, he thought he might have been neglecting his duties at home, and decided to take care of that problem.

Later that day, Nancy made brunch, fed Jake and Josh, then made sure Moose was fed. Ron took Moose out for a walk, and the poor dog had forgotten how to walk in snow, and got buried several times until he got the hang of it just in time, because he needed to water a tree real bad. Moose did much better loping back to the house. Ron dried him off, then they played tug-of-war, which Moose won. Ron sat down and petted Moose for a while, then they went inside because they were both cold.

Nancy had hot cocoa waiting for Ron, but Moose had to make do with dog food, but he didn't seem to mind. They went into the living room, lit the fire in the fireplace, turned on the stereo, and cuddled in the warmth of the fire. Jake and Moose sacked out on Moose's bearskin rug in front of the fire, and Josh took a nap too. Ron enjoyed his domestic bliss.

Back in North Carolina, Samantha had finished most of her medical school, and was now an Intern in the ER. She learned to live on caffeine and total sleep deprivation. She spent what little personal time she had at church functions at Doc's church. She was teaching Sunday School when she got a Sunday off, and attending the occasional bible study. She was amazed at her transformation in less than 10 years; it was like she was a new person. She didn't date, since she didn't have time, but had several doctors and interns she was friendly with. Doc was impressed with her since she graduated in the top 10% of her class, and was accepted into the University of North Carolina's Medical School on her own merit, without any help from Doc. He hoped she could complete her studies and become an MD with the specialty of Emergency Surgery she wanted. She definitely had the hands for it. When he showed her how to suture using a pig's foot, she got it right the first time, and he checked her scalpel cuts, and she was pretty good with a knife, only cutting the tissue she had to - she had real steady hands, which

was a surgeon's stock in trade. He wished she would follow him into Neurosurgery, but she didn't express any interest. She apologized, but said she could do much more good working in a big city ER saving lives while specialists like him tackled the very delicate specialty of Neurosurgery.

Truth be known, she liked the action and excitement of Emergency Surgery instead of the minute detail of neurosurgery where every single move was planned weeks or months in advance. She was hooked when she assisted a resident with a gunshot wound to the chest. He was in and out in 15 minutes, and repaired all the damage, and saved the patient's life. The resident explained later she should prepare herself for the eventuality of a patient dying on her, since Emergency Surgery was very risky, but the patient would die anyway without the surgery. She told him that her faith in God would get her through the ones that didn't make it, since God was the final arbitrator of who lived and died. He couldn't argue with that, since he knew of cases where the patient should have died, and somehow managed to live.

Chapter 12 - Don't Bug me!

Washington DC, Later that Spring

“Mr. President, we have a crisis on our hands and we have to shut down all interstate travel until we get a handle on this outbreak.”

“Doctor Hughes, do you have any idea what this will do to the economy?”

“With all due respect Mr. President, do you know how many fatalities this outbreak can cause if we let it spread. Assuming 1 million infections, between 10 and 100 thousand people will die depending on age and health. The mortality rate for this strain of SARS is almost 100% for the aged and infirm. In healthy people, it kills 1 out of 1,000. It's airborne, so if it gets into the nursing homes, it could solve our Medicare funding problem in a month!”

“Doctor Hughes, That was NOT funny!”

“Sorry Mr. President. You need to act NOW, tomorrow might be too late. Congress will debate this to death like it always does, and if it runs its course with no intervention by the CDC, between 1 and 10 million Americans will be dead by summer.”

“OK you've made your point Doctor; I'll sign the EO grounding all US Airlines until further notice.”

Later that afternoon on National TV

Ladies and Gentlemen:

As President of the United States, my first responsibility is to the safety of our citizens. The Director of the CDC informed me today of an outbreak of a new strain of SARS. As of 0800 tomorrow, all US air travel and interstate non-commercial travel will be stopped for the duration. We know there are millions of people needing to get home, so immediately following this broadcast will be local information on where to purchase or obtain an N95 or N100 filter mask and pick one up. No one showing flu-like symptoms will be allowed to travel via common carrier until medically cleared. National Guard units will be putting up checkpoints to make sure everyone is wearing a mask, and isn't sick. Those showing symptoms will be detained for medical evaluation. I'm sorry I have to go to these extremes, but if we took no action, between 1 and 10 million Americans could die. This will run its course by Summer, so the Emergency will only last 90 days. All airlines not involved in returning passengers to their homes are grounded, as are all international flights. Foreign visitors will be allowed to return home only after a medical examination.

Please return to your homes in an orderly fashion. There is no reason not to work once you are wearing the proper filter mask. We have ample stocks, and will distribute them as quickly as possible. After this broadcast, your local CDC or Health Department representative will tell you where to go to pick up a mask, or where to go if you have flu-like symptoms.

Good Night and God Bless America

15 minutes after the address, BA's fax machine spat out several forms. The first one read:

FAA NOTICE TO FLYERS

All Domestic and international passenger flights are grounded as of 0800 tomorrow morning. Written permission is required for each flight returning people to their homes. NO non-essential passenger flights will be allowed. Aircraft flying returning passengers must be thoroughly decontaminated between flights using a CDC approved disinfectant.

The second notice read:

From: Alaska Airlines

To: All Carriers

Re: FAA Notice to Flyers

Alaska Airlines will fly a limited schedule to return passengers to their homes starting tomorrow. All passengers must be wearing an approved mask prior to boarding, and cannot remove it during the flight for any reason. We will have masks available starting tomorrow. Please do not use the telephone for further information. We will notify you of any updates as we receive them, including a schedule of flights.

Bradley Whinton III
CEO, Alaska Airlines

BA called Ron, "Ron, we need to recall all our planes until they get this thing ironed out. I've cancelled all outbound flights from Anchorage and Fairbanks until we hear from the FAA. If we have Alaskan residents stranded at those airports, we'll have to fly them home. Also, I can imagine all the hunters would probably want to go home as well."

"BA, I've got a couple of N100 filters in my kit, and my plane is the easiest to decontaminate since it's got a simple multi-use cabin with removable seats. I'm not too keen on spraying bleach solution on the seats, so I hope the CDC has another disinfectant we can use that won't bleach the fabric out."

"Ron, I'll check and get back to you!"

“OK, BA - go ahead and recall all our planes, and we’re grounded until further notice except to fly people home, and those flights will be very limited.”

BA called Bill, because he had duties as the Mayor of Allakaket, and needed to know so he could tell the people of Allakaket. “Bill, its BA. Did you hear the speech? OK, here’s the skinny. Allakaket Airlines will be shut down for 90 days with the exception of flights to return people to their homes or emergency flights. You might want to tell the people so they can prepare. We’ve got over a year’s worth of food and supplies in stock at the General Store, and we will extend credit to anyone who is laid off due to the emergency. Our diesel and avgas tanks are full, so we have several million gallons of fuel. Unfortunately this will also mean that you’ll have an empty inn for 90 days. OK, don’t worry about the fuel and energy bill; we’ll work it out later. Take care Bill.”

All over the United States, the CDC sent a notice declaring a Medical Emergency which drafted all Doctors, Nurses, and health care professionals for the duration. Samantha was just coming off a 12-hour shift when the Hospital Administrator gave her the bad news. “Sam, you can’t go home. The CDC has issued a Health Emergency due to this SARS outbreak, and we’re recalling all doctors, nurses, and even interns. Here’s an N100 mask and the rest of your gear. Go in the changing room and get into it, then report to the resident. From here on out, treat all patients as if they were infected. This bug is airborne, and will either make you real sick or kill you, so don’t take any chances. Since you just came off a 12-hour shift, after you check in, go take a nap in the doctor’s lounge. If we get busy we’ll call you.”

In Anchorage, Dan was having a major Excedrin Headache. He had to ground all flights by 0800, and still get passengers home. His phone was ringing off the hook, and the entire office was in an uproar. He wished the CDC would have given the FAA a heads-up so they could have gotten ready for this. He was trying to rearrange flight schedules, recall essential personnel, and answer questions from the media and the airlines. It was times like these that he wished he would have stayed a Bush Pilot.

The next weeks were chaotic as people scrambled to get home. Fortunately there wasn’t much panic, and people proceeded homeward in an orderly fashion. The NG Checkpoints weren’t very intrusive, more like the Border Patrol checkpoints that allowed most of the vehicles through at a pace slow enough so the guardsmen could see everyone was wearing a mask, and wasn’t visibly ill. The main thrust of the containment was a complete lock-down at nursing homes and hospitals, where there were no visitors allowed, and all elective surgery was cancelled. Several cities with major international airports had reports of outbreaks that were quickly contained by the protocols in place.

The travel and airline industries were hardest hit, since they had just gotten over the fuel crisis a few years ago, and several smaller airlines went bankrupt when they couldn’t make their loan payments. They asked Congress for relief, but none came soon enough to matter. Most of the bigger airlines had enough capital to weather the storm, and survived. The net result was a

return to the pre-80's Big 3 airlines flying almost 95% of the routes. The conservative Congress decided to let market pressures determine the pricing of tickets, and refused to get involved. Ron breathed a big sigh of relief, since any extra regulations usually meant lost profits. He knew that if there was demand, someone would fill it, and eventually the cut-rate airlines would be back. By the time summer rolled around, the outbreak was controlled, and the virus was burning itself out. Slowly the public resumed flying again, but Ron knew that they were in for several lean years until the traveling public went back to their usual routine.

With the extended down time, they took care of maintenance and any other projects they had in the works. Ron decided to install a 5,000 gallon tank for JP-5 at the cabin and chop down just enough trees to allow the TG to taxi up closer to the house. Since the CH-47 was on down time as well, they were able to remove the old hangar, build a bigger pad, and install a larger hangar. Ron also had them dig a root cellar, even if he didn't have any root vegetables to put in it. He told Bear he wanted enough firepower in that root cellar to defend the cabin in the event that TSHTF. Bear said he would take care of it. Ron decided that while he was at it, he might just convert the root cellar to a storm shelter, and added a few extra things to it, and dug it 3 times the original size. Funny thing was, there never had been a tornado in that part of Alaska in recorded history, but no one pointed that out to him. When he got back home, Nancy told him she was pregnant with their third child. He realized that Nancy got pregnant every time he had a couple of weeks to kill. He hoped he'd be a little busier in the future, or they would be able to field their own Ice Hockey team. Jake and Josh were getting bigger, and Jake was to the toddler stage, and Moose wound up being his portable support, but he knocked him over as often as he helped. Nancy was glad that Jake had a well-padded bottom. He was now big enough to wrap his arms around Moose's neck and hang on for dear life when he was losing his balance.

Ron went back up to the cabin to check on the progress, and discovered Bear had gone a little overboard with the "root cellar". It was now bigger than the house, and almost as big as the hangar. The steel doors had a wood veneer that made everyone think it was just a root cellar until you opened it. The walls, floor, and roof were waterproofed and reinforced concrete 6 inches thick, and the roof was reinforced to the point that it could survive a near miss by a large bomb. The floor was almost 20 feet underground, and the roof had 6 feet of earth on top. In one corner was the largest gun safe he had ever seen, with several scoped National Match M-1a's, several M-16/M-203 combinations, his older Barrett rifle, and cases of ammo. He saw something he didn't even want to know about marked 40mm, so he closed the safe. There were cupboards full of canned food, medicine, water, seeds, and paper products. Ron estimated that a family of 6 could live on those supplies for almost a year. On his way out, Ron noticed the doors had 2 inch bolts to secure them once the door was closed, and a security lock on the outside to keep unauthorized personnel out. There was a caretaker that lived on a nearby lake who came by once every couple of months to check on the place. He flew a small Cessna Amphibian and remarked more than once that HelpmeJack lake was one of the smallest lakes he had ever landed on. When Ron told him he landed the DeHaviland and later the TurboGoose on that lake, he said "Either you're the biggest liar this side of the Mississippi, or you've got 3-pound brass ones."

One day he was tending the place and heard the roar of Ron flying overhead getting ready to land the TurboGoose. He dashed out to the lake to watch. When Ron landed, Earl shook his hand and wondered if he needed suspenders to keep his underwear up. Ron didn't bother to tell him that the TG landed a lot shorter than his Cessna thanks to the reversible pitch props. When he got ready to leave, Earl helped him tow the TG out of the hangar with the 4wd ATV that was still in the garage where he left it next to the snow blower. Once Earl was clear, he started the turbines, and taxied out to the lake. With the huge tires and high wing-mounted props, he was able to taxi faster, and soon was in the lake heading for the downwind end. Minutes later he took off, and Earl followed minutes later. Ron flew home to Allakaket. Nancy met him with the good news that they were having a daughter. Ron was just glad the baby was OK. He spent the rest of the afternoon playing with Jake, Josh, and Moose. After playtime came naptime, with Jake and Josh sacked out with Moose on his bearskin rug. Ron and Nancy crashed on the couch, glad for the break.

Finally, when the CDC declared the crisis was over, Samantha put in for vacation, and was granted 1 week of vacation as "comp time" in place of 30 hours of overtime. Since she had almost 100 hours of overtime due, she wasn't worried about the money. She asked Doc where she should go on vacation. She didn't feel like flying because it still was a royal pain, so Doc suggested she spend it at home and around town visiting friends. Samantha thought that was a good idea, and spent the next couple of days getting caught up on her sleep, then getting caught up with her friends. Soon the vacation was over and she reported for work in time to assist on the backlog of elective surgeries. She assisted a Surgical Resident with a routine hernia repair surgery. She was amazed at how fast he was. He told her later that speed was a premium for surgeons, but never to sacrifice accuracy and thoroughness for speed. Opening a patient twice was worse than taking more time and doing the job right the first time.

Slowly but surely, business picked up at Alaska Airlines and Allakaket Airlines. It took several years to get back to where they were before the virus, but both airlines were in position to ride out the turbulence with minimal upset, since BA had enacted an austerity program at Alaska Airlines when he was CEO, and got the bills paid down to the point that they could weather 3-6 months of little or no business and not go out of business like some other smaller carriers who were in debt up to their eyeballs, and had to keep flying to pay their enormous bills. Nancy had a baby girl they called Sarah, and now they had 3 children. Nancy was getting used to the Mommy routine, and with the airline business slow but steady, Ron had more time to spend at home with his wife and kids. Anne was working at the State Clinic in Allakaket as Dr. Miller's nurse part time, and spent the rest of the time as Grandma to her 3 grandkids.

Chapter 13 - Closure

Samantha knew there was an upside to the medical emergency when she met all the other interns and residents in the course of the 90-day emergency, and decided she wanted to get to know a 1st year resident named Ralph. She didn't know his last name yet, but they met in the Doctor's lounge and between crises, they got to talking. He was from Louisiana and like her was a Southern Baptist, and had been home schooled. She thought she was from the Middle of Nowhere until he started telling her that he grew up in the middle of the bayou. She ran into him later, and he asked her if she'd join him for a cup of coffee at the diner a block away that served the hospital and businesses in the area. She checked with her Supervisor, who told her that she could take half an hour. Ralph checked with the Chief Resident. Since it was slow, he told him OK, but to make sure his pager was on. Ralph checked his pager, and turned it on, then found Samantha and asked if she were ready. They walked to the diner, and on the way found out Ralph's name was Raphael Lacombe, and was a Cajun who didn't speak more than a couple of words of the dialect, but his grandparents did while he was growing up. She let him do most of the talking, and on the way back, pulled him aside, and told him the truth about her background. "Look Ralph, I like you, so I'm going to level with you. I'm not related to Doc Richards. My real name is Samantha Stone, and I'm from Alaska."

"Ok, but why the big secret?"

"It's a long story Ralph." Seeing that they weren't going anywhere and she had the time she gave him the short version of the story.

"Sam, you're amazing - nothing's ever happened to me in my life. You've survived 2 horrible incidents, and now look at you; you're a sweet woman and a Christian to boot."

"Ralph, what do you mean?"

"Sam, sometimes people blame God for bad things that happen to them, and they stay mad at God, when really they're mad at the one person who can help them!"

"Ralph, at first I felt that way, but then Ron and Pastor Whitaker talked to me and straightened me out, and set me on the right path."

"I've heard of Pastor Whitaker, I'd like to meet Ron and thank him."

"Then you'd have to fly to Allakaket Alaska."

"Did you say Allakaket?"

"Oh, I forgot, Ron's a Bazillionaire and the owner of Allakaket Airlines. Doc met him when

Doc went hunting in Alaska. Ron's married with 3 kids."

"How old did you say he was?"

"If I remember correctly, he's in his early 20's and his wife's a couple years older."

"It's not like I'll have the time anytime soon, but I'd like to find Ron and thank him, for more reasons than 1."

"What's the other reasons?"

"Well for one thing, without him getting hold of Doc Richards, I would have never met you!"

Sam gave Ralph a friendly hug and a kiss. When he recovered, his first thought was "WOW". He took her hand, and they walked back to the hospital. Samantha had found a friend. It was too soon to call him a Boyfriend, and she realized she had all the time in the world to get to know him. When they got to the door, Ralph turned and said "Sam, I had fun, I'd like to do this again!"

"Me too Ralph, but we have to cool it, since we'll have to work together for the next 4 years at least."

"You got it Sam. I appreciated the kiss, but it was something special that we should definitely not try at work!"

"I agree - these people can gossip worse than a bunch of old women. See ya later Ralph." Sam walked through the door, and a minute later, he walked through and checked in.

The rest of the day was hectic, and she didn't see Ralph again for the rest of the day. She drove her Carmen Ghia home to Doc's place. "Doc, Bert I'm home!" Bert walked in to greet Sam "Doc had to fly to Atlanta to perform a risky brain surgery, he'll be back in a day or so." Sam dumped her stuff in her room and fired up her computer. 5 minutes later she screamed "Oh My God, It's HIM!"

Bert ran into the room, and Sam was pointing at the screen. Ron had sent her and Doc a clipping from the Anchorage newspaper. It was an article about a shooting death in Anchorage. An alumnus of the TKE house at University of Anchorage was shot attempting to rape a blonde jogger in a secluded park just outside Anchorage. She was carrying a .357 Magnum in her fanny pack and shot him once through the heart when he attempted to rape her. What got Samantha to scream was the file photo from the University of him wearing his TKE sweater. "Bert that's the guy who slipped me the Mickey, then raped me. The story says he tried to rape a blonde jogger in the park, and she shot him dead. I've managed to put it past me, but I always wanted justice, and now it seems his case has been appealed to a higher authority."

“So it seems dear. Let’s go out for dinner tonight, I’ll call Nelson to bring the car around.”

They drove to their favorite restaurant, and Bert did her best to keep Sam’s mind off the e-mail. Sam told her about her day, and when she told Bert about Ralph, Bert was smiling.

“Sam, I knew you’d find a nice young man here. Just take it slow and easy, you’re going to be at the Hospital as an Intern, then as a Resident before you could even think about relocating. He’s a first-year resident, so he’s going to be here a while too. I’m really happy for you. If you want to bring him by for Dinner sometime, I’m sure Doc would like to meet him too.”

“Bert, I told Ralph the truth, I think I can trust him.”

“I hope you’re right dear. Remember loose lips sink ships!”

“Speaking of which, he’s a pretty good kisser too!”

“Sam!”

“Relax Bert, it was just a friendly kiss, I’m not ever going back to what I was before! According to him, he’s Southern Baptist too!”

“Good for him! I can’t wait to meet this gentleman.”

“Bert, we’re just friends - maybe later.”

They made girl talk the rest of the night, and when they were ready to leave, the Matre de called Nelson on the car phone, and he was waiting out front with the limousine. They drove back home, and Sam told Bert she had a wonderful evening, but she was beat and needed to get right to bed.

She saw Ralph several times over the next couple of weeks, but never had enough time together to say anything more than “Hi” finally they had a rare day off together, and Sam asked Ralph if he wanted to go to church with them. When he said yes, she told him to meet her at Doc Richards’ house at 8:45 Sunday Morning and the 4 of them could ride over in the limousine. Ralph had that “deer in the headlights” look, Sam had neatly trapped him, and he knew it. Doc Richards was one of the most famous alumni of the University of North Carolina. He was one of its biggest contributors as well. Ralph was glad he had bought a suit and tie, because he was sure that Doc and his family would be dressed that way. Ron drove his Honda Accord up to the gate, and was admitted at 8:40. He parked off to one side, since the Limousine was already in front of the house. He walked up to the door, and Doc Richards answered. “Ralph, we’ve been expecting you. The women will be down in a minute, let’s have a seat in the parlor.” Once they were seated, Doc Richards started asking Ralph questions. “Ralph, Sam tells me you’re a first year resident in Emergency Medicine?”

“Yes Sir!”

“Ralph, please call me Doc when we’re alone like this, or just the 4 of us. At School or the hospital, either Sir or Doc Richards will be ok.”

“Yes Sir, I mean Doc!”

“Ralph, relax, this isn’t the Spanish Inquisition, just a friendly chat.”

“Doc, I beg your pardon, but you’re one of the most famous people at UNC, and I’m just a first-year resident.”

“I understand that Ralph, but I was once a first-year resident too. So relax and enjoy yourself today. I hope you don’t mind going to lunch with us, I’ve taken the liberty of making a reservation for 4.”

“Thanks Doc, I’d appreciate it. Sam’s said a lot about you, and I really think highly of you.”

“Ralph, you don’t need to butter me up, Sam’s not my daughter. If I remember correctly, she said she told you her story.”

“Frankly Doc, I’m amazed that Sam has turned out to be such a sweet loving woman.”

“She’s had a lot of help, plus she always had a good heart. She was a little naive and sheltered from growing up in Allakaket. I’m glad you and her are such good friends.”

“Doc, I’ve only been able to see her once since the virus scare, and that was for coffee at the diner. I’d like to get to know her better, and really be friends with her first before I even consider any serious dating.”

“I’m glad to hear that, between your attitude and the fact that you’re a Southern Baptist, I’m glad you met Sam.”

Bert and Sam decided to make an appearance, and Ralph thought to himself, “Saved by the Bell!” Except he mentally spelled it Belle when he got a look at Sam in a dress. She was wearing a long dress, and was stunningly beautiful. They made their way to the Limousine, and they were seated in the Limousine, Bert and Sam sat across from Ralph and Doc. Sam thought that Ralph looked pretty hot in his grey suit. They drove to the church, and when they were seated in the pew, Sam made sure that Ralph got to sit next to her. They shared a hymnal, and she found out he was a pretty good singer, she had learned how to read music from her time at the church. She had a good singing voice, but until the choir director showed her how, she couldn’t read a lick of music. Ralph was a natural Baritone, and she was technically a Contralto, but usually sang Soprano on the lower songs, since the melody line was easier to read

and sing. Most of their songs were performed on a beautiful modern reed and pipe organ that cost more than some people's houses. The choirmaster directed a 100-voice choir, which was about right for the size of the building. The Congregation sang as well, except for one song per Sunday the Choir did by themselves in 3-parts. Doc thought the choir sounded beautiful, and Sam wished she had the time to sing with them, since the choirmaster insisted that you had to practice with the choir to sing with them. With her hours at the hospital, she was lucky to be able to attend Church once or twice a month. When the service was over, Sam introduced Ralph to Pastor Whitaker, except she introduced Ralph using his full name, Raphael Lacombe.

"Lacombe did you say, I know a bunch of Lacombe's from Louisiana."

"Well Sir, that's where I'm from, like the CCR song, I was born on the Bayou."

Reverend Whitaker stunned them all when he started speaking in Cajun.

"Sorry Reverend, I only caught the first couple of words, but I'd love to learn if I ever have the time."

"Young man, there's no shame in being born poor, after all Jesus was born in a stable!"

"Amen, Reverend."

"I've got some tapes you can use to learn Cajun that I can loan you."

"Merci Beaucoup Révérend!"

"I thought you couldn't speak Cajun?"

"Sam that just sort of slipped out."

"Young man - your patois was perfect, you speak Cajun like a native, all you need to do is re-learn the language. I'm sure you heard it all the time growing up."

"Reverend, my grandparents mostly spoke Cajun, but understood English."

"There you go, you've still got the programming, you just have to recall the program."

Later, when they got back in the limousine, Sam turned to Ralph "That was amazing, it seems you do know how to speak Cajun, you just forgot that you know."

"Sam, I'd love to get those tapes from Reverend Whitaker, if I could speak and understand Cajun, imagine all the good I could do. There are thousands of square miles of bayou, and thousands of bayou people who can't speak English who desperately need medical care."

Doc spoke from the back of the Limousine, “Ralph, I thought you wanted to be an ER Doc?”

“I still do Doc, that doesn’t mean I can’t take a summer off and volunteer to serve in Louisiana with the people I grew up with. Just being able to speak the language as a native would put me way ahead of anyone coming in without it, since they don’t trust outsiders. Once I make contact and gain their trust, we could build clinics and have the state assign a permanent doc down there. Even if it took a year to set this up, imagine all the lives we could save, not to mention improving the quality of life in the bayou.”

Sam was so proud of Ralph that she would have kissed him if Doc weren’t there. Instead, she squeezed his hand and smiled.

“Ralph, if you’re serious about this, I’ve got the connections to set it up.”

“Doc, I’m dead serious. I lost a brother and sister to diseases that could easily have been cured with modern medicine, and I don’t want to see anyone else go through that heartache.”

“Ok, Ralph, you learn Cajun and complete your residency, and I’ll set it up with the state of Louisiana.”

“You got a deal Doc.”

They spent the rest of the day between the restaurant and their home making small talk. When Ralph announced he had to go, Sam volunteered to walk him to the car.

“Ralph, I’m so proud of you, and if you want to see me again, I’d look forward to it. Here’s my number here if you want to talk to me.” Sam leaned over, gave Ralph a hug and a quick kiss. Ralph reached into his pocket, and extracted a “calling card” with his contact info on it.

“Ralph, a Calling Card - kind of old-fashioned isn’t it?”

Ralph said in his best Ret Butler impersonation “Ma’am, that’s what us Southern Gentlemen do?”

Sam floored Ralph when she tried out Scarlet O’Hara “My Hero!”

They both laughed themselves silly. Ralph said goodbye to Sam, got in his car carefully so as not to get his suit dirty, and drove home. Sam walked back in giggling. Bert asked her what was so funny. “Ralph, he’s such a character. He handed me a calling card, talk about old-fashioned.”

Doc overheard the conversation. “Sam, actually Ralph is formally asking to “court” you. It means he’s serious.”

“Whoa Doc - what’s this.”

“Southern tradition. When a man wants to date a woman seriously, he meets the parents, and if they approve, which we do, and she expresses interest, he hands her a “calling card” if she accepts, they are officially courting. Kind of what you would call “going steady”. There are formal rules for courting, mostly to protect the woman. They can only be alone in a public place, or in her parlor. As long as you are courting, neither of you can date anyone else. But either of you can officially call it off and date someone else. The repercussions of that are serious, because calling it off means you no longer want to see Ralph again as a suitor.”

“Doc, I really like Ralph, but I don’t want to marry him yet.”

“That’s not the point Sam. He’s just being “courtly” and I approve. It’s how we do things here in the South. Just be glad he’s not going all out, he would have greeted you with a cutlass and pistol in case you had another suitor, and was challenged to a duel.”

“You’re kidding Right?”

“Sam through the 1800s, dueling for the affections of a prize Belle was still fairly common.”

Sam was going to say something, but bit her tongue. She might not understand the local customs, but she wasn’t raised here either, and she was a guest in their home. Besides, she thought it was kind of cute. She did an internet search for more information, so she would know what to expect.

Chapter 14 - Vacation

After Sarah was weaned, Anne called Ron and Nancy, and suggested she could watch her grandkids for a week or two and give them a needed vacation together. Ron asked Nancy where she wanted to go, and since it was hunting season, she told Ron that she always wanted to hunt a Caribou. Ron told her that there was a huge herd of them on their land up near the HelpmeJack Lake. Nancy thought it would be fun to spend a week in a real log cabin. Ron called his mom back, and said they would take her up on it, that they wanted to spend a week or so up at their cabin by the lake. Anne thought that was a good idea, and volunteered to give Nancy her Browning A-bolt rifle since she was too old to hunt anymore, and she hadn't used it in years. Ron thought that was really sweet of his mom, and told her he would be over to pick it up in half an hour. Anne told him to pick it up when they dropped off the grandkids instead. Ron asked if tomorrow morning was too soon. Anne said that would be great. Ron spent the rest of the day getting ready, and Nancy packed 2 weeks worth of stuff for the 3 kids. With 2 of them in diapers, she wondered if Anne knew what she was up against. She remembered Moose, and had Ron call her back and remind her about the Moose. Anne told them she could handle it, she wasn't an old lady yet, and she knew that Jake and Josh would miss Moose terribly if he weren't with them. Ron remembered they usually took their naps with Moose, so he agreed and threw a bag of dog food into the stuff they were bringing to Anne's place.

Early in the morning the next day they drove to Anne's place, dropped the 3 kids and Moose off with a huge supply of baby food, diapers, dog food, and clothes. Anne told Nancy she must have packed enough stuff for a month, then laughed thinking she would have done exactly the same in her place. Anne handed Nancy her Browning A-bolt and the rest of her .308 Match ammo, then handed them another large package, and told them to open it when they got to the cabin. Ron kissed his Mom, then Nancy gave Anne a hug and kissed her cheek, then they were going out the door. Nancy bid a tearful goodbye to her kids, who were too busy with Grandma and Moose to notice. Ron wrapped his arm around Nancy and gently led her to the truck, telling her they were in good hands. Nancy put the gun case, ammo and the present in the bed of the truck, and drove to the TurboGoose. They loaded their suitcases and packages into the plane, and Nancy sat in the co-pilot's seat. Ron was glad to have his wife up front with him. "Just like old times!"

"Except this flight is too short to join the mile high club."

Ron had to laugh at that, then he said "I think we can wait until we get inside the cabin."

An hour later, they landed at the lake and taxied up to the hangar. Since the door was closed, Ron opened the hangar doors, then towed the plane inside using the 4x4 ATV as a tractor. Once the plane was secure in the hangar, Nancy got out and they unloaded the plane. The interior of the cabin was dusty, but not too bad. An hour later, they had the cabin swept and cleaned up. Nancy asked where the bathroom was, and Ron said that the bathroom was

outdoors. Nancy looked at him a little funny, and he said “We had an outhouse here ever since Mom and Dad built the cabin. It gets too cold in the winter to have running water since we used the lake as the water source, so they never installed indoor plumbing except for the sink.”

“Ron, Bear and Hunter have indoor plumbing, and if you want me to stay here more than a week at a time, I think we should too - it’s not like we can’t afford to dig a well.”

Ron had to agree with Nancy, and added it to his “to do” list. He figured while they were at it, they might as well install a full bathroom with a shower and a flush toilet. He walked outside and checked. If they moved the garage, he could add a “bathroom” to the cabin, but it would be small and cramped, since the far side wouldn’t have 6 feet of clearance due to the slope of the roof. He called Nancy outside and explained the problem to her. He’d either need to totally rebuild the cabin, or else have a small and cramped bathroom. She threw up her hands and walked back in. Ron let it drop.

The next morning, Nancy said she wanted to go hunting. They could easily ride double and still bring back 1 whole caribou or 2 tanned skins and the prime cuts of meat. He didn’t want to waste the meat, so before they went hunting, he made sure the canning supplies, and Anne’s canning book was still in the cabin. They were all sitting where they had left them. He easily had enough jars to can 2 caribou, and enough boxes with dividers to haul it all back to Allakaket. He found Nancy and explained to her that if they went hunting, they also had to skin, gut and butcher the caribou, and then can the meat when they got back to the cabin. It was smelly, hot and sweaty work. She said “OK, what are you waiting for?” He checked that there was plenty of wood for the stove, and the water was connected, then he said they were good to go. He strapped on his fanny pack, and turned it around front so Nancy could comfortably ride behind him, then put on his shoulder holster and picked up his daybag full of water, and they walked out to the ATV. He hitched the trailer to it, handed her a helmet, then lashed the rifles and backpack to the trailer. He checked the gas and oil, then started the ATV and climbed on, then told Nancy to climb on back and hold on tight. Nancy took him literally, and feeling her body crushed against his back made it hard to concentrate on his driving. He drove slower than usual since he had a passenger, but they still made it to the hunting grounds in a couple of hours.

They hiked over the hill, and there were literally hundreds of Caribou in the meadow below them. He showed Nancy where to set up, handed her a pair of earplugs, and set up his own rifle. Since they were going to take 2 large caribou, he wanted Nancy to get the first shot, and told her to shoot a big bull in the heart-lung region right below the shoulder. Her rifle had a bipod, so she was able to easily hold on the heart-lung region of a big bull. They quickly stuck their earplugs in their ears, since the caribou weren’t going anywhere, and when they were ready, Nancy shot first, and as soon as her bull was down, Ron fired, and his dropped too. He walked over to her and gave her a big hug and a kiss “Great Shooting Sweetie - now let’s go get the ATV and the trailer so we can skin, gut and butcher these big brutes.” They unloaded the SPBT ammo, and put the rifles back in their cases. 15 minutes later, they were riding the ATV

and when they entered the clearing, the herd spooked. Ron drove right up to the two downed bulls, and quickly skinned and gutted them. He cut the heads off the bulls, and cracked the skulls to brain tan them. Nancy got one whiff of the contents, and decided to stay upwind and start butchering the one bull. She wasn't the most skilled at butchering, but did it correctly while Ron washed the skins, and mashed the brains into the hide while mixing it with water to make a paste. When he was finished, he walked over to Nancy with Caribou Brain Matter dripping from his hands and said "How about a Hug?"

"Ron Williams you stay away from me - you STINK!"

Ron knew he shouldn't push his luck- she had his Bowie knife. He walked to the pond and washed off as thoroughly as possible. He helped her finish butchering the two carcasses, and loaded them into a large trash bag on the trailer, and did the same with the skins. When they were finished, they had just enough daylight to make it home, so he started the ATV, and they climbed on. They made it home right as it was growing dark. Ron backed the trailer into the smokehouse, and shut the door; then parked the ATV. Nancy had unloaded their stuff from the trailer, and went inside to make dinner. They had plenty of canned food, so they ate a simple dinner while Ron cleaned up as best as he could with a washcloth in the sink. It took several tries to get off all the stink, but finally Nancy let him get close enough to give him a hug. After dinner, they went to bed early. Ron felt weird sleeping in his parent's bed, but Roy was dead, and Anne lived in Allakaket now. Ron gave in when Nancy made it clear she was in the mood.

The next morning after breakfast, Ron showed Nancy how to can the Caribou. Once she had the hang of the canning operation, he switched to filling jars with caribou meat while she sterilized the lids and processed the filled jars. By the end of the day, they were done, and Nancy decided she wanted fresh fish for dinner. Ron remembered the fishing hole, so they went. Halfway there, he heard a wolf growl, and turned. It was a male wolf that looked just like Sam. "Easy boy, I'm a friend!"

Taking a big risk, since he thought the wolf was one of Oliver and Francine's descendants, he decided not to shoot it, and to try and make friends. He had Nancy slowly get behind him, and he crouched down and extended his hand in the classic "Sniff my hand and let's be friends" pose. Amazingly, the Wolf's aggressive behavior stopped, and he walked over to them. Ron's heart was beating a million miles a second, and finally the wolf got close enough to sniff his hand, and somehow didn't take a huge bite out of Ron's hand. Ron didn't know why, but the wolf seemed to trust him. They turned and walked to the lake, and cast a line. The first fish they caught went to the wolf, who devoured it. He was full by the second lake trout, so Ron started putting fish on the stringer. The wolf walked up to the lake, drank his fill, and walked back over to them and laid down next to Ron. Nancy was amazed, but Ron said nothing. Ron reached over and started to pet the wolf, and he appeared to enjoy it. When he had 4 fish on the stringer, he got up to go, and the wolf got up too, and trotted back to the woods. Ron remembered there was a wolf den nearby, but didn't dare push his luck. He wished the wolf well, and they walked back to their cabin. Once the door was closed, Nancy started in on him.

“Ron Williams, are you nuts - that wolf could have killed us!”

“Yes he could have, but I sensed something in the wolf, something familiar. It was weird, but I could have sworn that the wolf was Sam’s nephew. Anyway, the wolf had no intention of harming us, he just wanted to protect his pups in the den.”

“What pups, all I saw was a big scary wolf!”

“About 50 yards away there was an old wolf den, the same one Oliver and Francine used. I’m sure he had a mate and cubs at the den, and we were too close for comfort. As soon as he realized we were no threat, he settled right down, and feeding him definitely helped.”

“Yeah, and then you had to go and pet the wolf!”

“Nancy, you do realize the only difference between a Wolf - *Canis Lupus*, and a Dog - *Canis Familiaris* is less than 1 or 2 gene sequences. Moose is like 99.9% Wolf, and domestic dogs are just a case of arrested development and inbreeding for certain traits. Once he realized we were friendly and I fed him, I was in about as much danger as petting Moose.”

“OK, let’s make dinner, I’m just thanking God we’re still alive.”

Ron quickly skinned and cleaned the fish while Nancy lit the stove, and got a cast iron skillet good and hot, then added oil to it, and when Ron gave her the fillets, she dredged them in flour and fried them in the hot skillet. She made instant mashed potatoes and added Butter Buds. Ron cleaned and set the table for dinner, and lit a kerosene lamp. When the fish were ready, Nancy plated the fish and added a large portion of mashed potatoes and some mixed vegetables. Ron said grace, and they ate dinner. Nancy was grateful to be alive, and after dinner, Ron knew he was in for a long night. Oh well, they had 3 more to go for a hockey team.

The next morning they packed up the canned caribou meat, and Nancy told Ron she had enough of the “great outdoors” and wanted to go home. Ron realized she was more scared by the incident with the wolf than she let on. He agreed, and they packed up. Ron towed the plane out of the hangar, shut the doors, and they repacked the plane. 2 hours later they were back in Allakaket. They drove home and Ron felt obligated to tell his mom they were home. She said “I can keep the kids for a couple more days - they’ve been total angels, you guys have fun.” Ron told Nancy, and asked what she wanted to do for a couple of days - he got his answer in a couple of minutes, and almost wished the kids were back so he could get some rest. 2 days later, he was ready to beg for mercy, he wasn’t a kid anymore. Nancy relented and they went over to Anne’s to pick up the kids. As soon as they got home, Jake, Josh and Sarah sacked out with Moose on the bearskin rug in front of the fireplace. Ron and Nancy collapsed on the couch, and Ron finally got some rest.

The next day, Ron talked with his mom, and got her permission to renovate the cabin. She

agreed that it was way too small for his family, and they needed to build bigger. She had several suggestions, including a full basement underneath. It would double the construction costs, since all the materials except the wood had to be flown in, but since he had a limited footprint, he needed all the square feet he could get in a limited footprint, and going underground instead of up had it's advantages. All their food could be stored in the basement for long periods, since the temperature was very consistent, and part of it could be converted to a play room, since there was no way they could get out and get into trouble. That convinced Ron, because Jake and Josh were both into the exploring stage, and they needed a kid-proof room. He took his ideas to Bill, who recommended a contractor, who agreed to re-use as much of the original material as possible. He reduced his price when Ron suggested they use his loader/backhoe to dig the basement instead of renting. Since he owned the airline, all it would cost to fly everything in would be the pilot's salary, and they were paying that anyway. The fuel costs were high, but they were still getting the best rates from the fuel distributor. Renting a chopper to fly all the materials in would have cost 3-4 times Ron's costs to have his own planes/pilots fly materials and personnel into the site.

Before he signed the contract, Ron suggested flying the Contractor up to the site. When he got there, he said he could reduce their contract another 30% if he could use some mature trees about 2 miles from the cabin site. Since he owned several hundred acres of trees, Ron agreed in a heartbeat, and asked they save the usable scraps for firewood. It would be a lot cheaper to fly in a portable sawmill, log and mill their own lumber than to fly lumber in from Anchorage or Fairbanks. Ron's idea for 2 separate rooms downstairs actually saved him money, since the contractor could use the interior wall as a weight bearing wall to support the floor above instead of erecting posts and beams to support the floor. The basement would be poured reinforced and waterproofed concrete, and everything else would be made from lumber logged and milled on site. Since winter was approaching, they agreed to start construction as soon as the snow melted in spring. Ron also asked the contractor to install a deep well and a septic system that could handle at least 2 full bathrooms. Ron got quotes over the internet to ship solar shingles and a large ground-mounted solar panel, several Air-X wind turbines, and a solar water heater that was backed up by a wood-burning water heater. All the inverters and batteries would be on racks in the basement. He found the best bang for the buck was a company called Outback Power Systems.

He purchased the 10KW rack-mount setup that included 4 2500w inverters, the control panel, and a 24-hour battery back-up. He added a small diesel generator that was a dedicated battery charger, connected to the system with an auto-transfer/auto-start switch so it would start when the battery state of charge reached 60% and insufficient power was generated by the panels or turbines, or at 55% state of charge regardless. It also had a maintenance mode that would run the generator for half an hour once a month to exercise the generator, and equalize the charges on the batteries. The entire system was controlled by a little computer control panel in the house. He added a 2,000 gallon underground tank for diesel fuel to the design to make sure they had enough fuel since it had to be delivered twice as far, and by air all the way. With the Pri-D, the diesel would basically store forever in an underground tank. All the indoor lighting

would be hidden florescent fixtures using 2 or 4-tube fixtures with a mix of warm and cool tubes to simulate normal daylight colors. The contractor located a “kid proof” hidden fixture that was much more durable than the normal dropped ceiling type plastic panel, since it was rigid and fixed in place. It took a screwdriver to remove the panel to get access to the tubes, ballast, and the fixture itself. Since florescent fixtures used 20-30% of the power per lumen as an incandescent light - they would save a lot of energy right there. A massive masonry stove/cooktop/oven stone fireplace was the main source of heat in the winter, and occupied the center of the room. Ron wondered if the downstairs needed a heater in the winter, and the salesman from Outback told him their equipment threw off enough heat to keep the basement above 60 degrees, besides with the warm house above it, it should be fine down there. Ron remembered the wood-fired water heater was in the basement as well, and that would contribute to keeping the basement warm. He asked the contractor to modify the design to include vents between the two rooms, and smoke/carbon Monoxide detectors on both floors with battery back ups.

Ron showed the design to Nancy, who made a few slight modifications that were basically cosmetic, but he thought they were good ideas. She did however move a couple of windows to better spots to take advantage of views, and also to get maximum solar gain in the winter from the south-facing windows. Ron realized this house would be a bear to heat in the winter, but he wasn't planning on living there in the winter, at least for now. Ron was glad he was starting a construction project, because the airline was running itself, making money hand over fist, and he only needed to fly occasionally since there was a huge surplus of qualified pilots thanks to Congress. Ron was tempted to have another TurboGoose built for his personal plane, and hire another pilot to fly the routes. He'd ask BA about that when he saw him again.

Chapter 15 - Construction Zone

The next morning Nancy found the box that Anne had given them, and called Ron over. “We forgot to open Anne’s gift!”

“No time like the present.”

They opened the box, and in it were 2 complete sets of Caribou Skin clothing including boots. Anne had pinned their names to their tops and bottoms. Knowing that Nancy didn’t wear a dress very often, she made shirt/pant combinations for both of them, and a pair of boots each with the vibram sole. They tried them on, and they fit perfectly. Ron wondered how Anne got their sizes, and figured Nancy had something to do with it. Ron called his mom up, and thanked her for the caribou clothes, then he called BA and had a talk with him.

“Hi BA, how’s things going?”

“Considering the rest of the travel industry is in the toilet, we’re doing great. Since most of our customers are hunters, fisherman, and oilfield or mine employees and have to fly to get where they want to be, business is back up to 80% of the previous level.”

“BA, could you run the numbers on hiring another pilot to take my route, and building me another TurboGoose as my personal plane. I’m getting tired of flying the friendly skies.”

“I know how you feel Ron, I got burned out running Alaska Airlines, and you’ve got so much cash that you could live off the interest for the rest of your life, never touch the principal, and not change your lifestyle 1 bit. As far as hiring another pilot and building another plane, I think it’s a good idea, that way he can be flying 40 hours a week instead of acting as the CEO 30 hours, then flying another 20. I’ll crunch the numbers and get back to you.”

“Thanks BA - talk to you later.”

Ron spent the rest of the winter with his family, and Nancy announced she was pregnant again. Ron looked at her, and she was just glowing. He gave her a big hug, and told her he was thinking of changing things a bit at Allakaket Airlines. He was getting tired of flying a route, and wanted to hire another pilot, and building another plane customized for them. Nancy was all for it, the long hours were showing and he was usually exhausted when he came home. “So what are you going to do with yourself?”

“I wanted to talk to the contractor about acting as a supervisor on the new lodge, even if I have to pay extra it’s going to be fun, and I’ll be home earlier and in a much better mood.”

Nancy thought that was a good idea, and told Ron to go ahead. He called the Contractor, who

told him they usually didn't want the homeowner acting as a Supervisor, but in his case he could make an exception. Ron said he would also have the cargo version of the TurboGoose available to fly stuff to the site as needed. He said they should use the CH-47 whenever possible because it had 3-5 times the lifting capacity of the TG, but if they needed light stuff that wasn't worth flying the chopper to get, he could pick it up. The contractor checked, and having Ron fly to Anchorage a couple of times a week with light loads would accelerate the project schedule, meaning more money for him. He agreed to Ron's idea, and told him that he would let him know the date they were going to start construction.

Ron called BA, and he said that Ron could use his TurboGoose until they built his new plane, and if they needed it, they could put the spare in service from Allakaket. Ron asked BA to contact Allison and the RCAF and see how long it would take to build another TG. BA admitted he already had the figures, and he could have another one built in 3-4 months depending on weather. Ron had to decide whether he wanted a Cargo variant or a VIP variant. The more he thought about it, the more sense it would make to build another plane like his original TurboGoose that was quickly convertible from passenger to cargo use by removing the seats. He could fly either by adding or removing seats. If he had to fly people and cargo, he just removed seats from the back to hold the cargo, and had the people fly in the forward seats in the cabin. He called BA, and they agreed the flexible cabin design was the best bet. Ron had a couple of ideas for the avionics suite for his aircraft, including commercial radar so he could fly day or night if he needed to. BA thought that was an excellent idea, since the planes that flew the Fairbanks/Nome route already had radar installed because bad weather could force them to land IFR even though they took off VFR. The FAA tended to look the other way, since the alternative would be to RTB, and that was bad for business, especially since President Hatch made it clear that the Alaskan oil fields were Militarily Essential Projects. That designation allowed the pilots to push the envelope a bit. They were military trained pilots, and were fully capable of landing in zero/zero conditions totally on instruments. During the winter, they went from 4 to 2 aircraft flying the Fairbanks/Nome route, so the other pilots just became co-pilots on the other planes, and kept flying, since they were more likely to fly in IFR conditions during the winter.

Ron was glad the winter was short and mild. Over the winter and during the start of spring, they dropped a storage building on the site, and moved everything from the cabin to the storage building behind the hangar. When the cabin was stripped bare, Ron called the contractor and said he was ready to start construction. With the good weather, they were able to start building in April instead of May or June. Jim flew the CH-47 non-stop for the first two weeks. Ron flew the crew in first, then their wall tents and equipment. They brought enough food and supplies to last a crew of 6 a month, and if it ran over that long, Ron would fly to Anchorage and pick up more supplies. Since Ron had an outhouse, they skipped the chemical toilets. Ron almost died laughing when he saw what they were using for a crane, then remembered his Dad used something even more primitive to build his "room addition. They built a fixed-length boom out of high-strength metal tubing, cut a slot in the end big enough to fit a 6" pulley, and used a 1" grade-8 bolt as an axle. The base of the unit was a 4-legged outrigger with 2 wheels.

They used an automotive 10K winch and a $\frac{3}{4}$ " wire rope instead of the $\frac{1}{2}$ " wire rope normally used, since it only needed to lift 20 feet max. The height of the boom was adjustable by a 10-ton bottle jack that had been fitted with safety pins in case of hydraulic failure. The winch was electrically powered, and a small gas generator and 2 huge deep cycle batteries were mounted on the rear to double as ballast to counter-balance any load. The mount was free-swinging, and could be swung even with a load attached by 2 men. It wasn't the most elegant crane he had ever seen, but the contractor said it had several things going for it. It was light, strong, portable, and didn't take a heavy-lift helicopter to move to remote sites. 10,000 pounds of lift was more than enough for a construction crane for Alaska, since your average 1-foot diameter log weighed less than half that amount.

One of the first trips the CH-47 made was with a small fuel bladder full of avgas for the generator, and a large fuel bladder full of fuel for Ron's diesel tractor. The Avgas bladder contained 500 gallons, and the diesel bladder contained 2,000 gallons, since the tractor would use a lot more fuel. The first day after they were set up, they started the demolition. Since the sod roof wouldn't be re-used, they quickly demolished it. Ron was glad Anne wasn't here, because she would probably be crying while they demolished her home. But like a phoenix, this would rise from the ashes greater than before. All the usable lumber and hardware was stacked off to a side. 2 days later, all that existed of the cabin was the bare dirt foundation. They flew in the loader/backhoe and started digging the basement while several other crewmen went to the location that the contractor told them about and started felling trees. Ron drove the ATV with the trailer so they didn't have to carry their gear over a mile away from the lodge. Between the 4 of them they made short work of felling enough trees to build the new lodge if you included the recycled wood they could use from the old house. The exterior would be made from 12" logs that were over 40 feet long. They located a stand of pine trees that would be perfect, and dropped the entire stand. They hooked a choker chain to the logs, and Ron dragged them to a clearing where they could more easily limb the logs. They waited for the tractor to drag the logs to the building site, since it could pull a lot of logs using their logging trolley. Ron flew home every afternoon so he was home by dark, and the crew stayed in their tents. The contractor was pleased since Ron wasn't acting as a "sidewalk supervisor" and was actually a big help. He decided that if they came in under budget he would refund most of the money he saved, at least what he could attribute to Ron's help. Ron was still tired when he came home, but his mood was much better, and a hot shower and a massage usually perked him right up. Sometimes he got a much different massage, and they skipped dinner or ate quickly.

Over the spring, the basement went in, and the construction crew swung into high gear. Ron was flying twice a week to Anchorage to pick stuff up and spent the rest of the time helping out and supervising. Having the owner on-site for decisions also helped the contractor with change orders, which often halted construction for a day or so while they got things straightened out. The portable sawmill was making lumber at a rate fast enough to easily keep up with the construction team, and with the use of FRS/GMRS radios, they were able to communicate clearly without the contractor running back and forth all day. The AE equipment was delivered before the floor was installed, making installation as simple as lowering the racks into the

basement and bolting them in place, then running the wires to the fuse panel on the main floor and the power leads to the roof as soon as the solar power roofing shingles were installed. Ron bought all AGM type deep cycle batteries, and paid 10% extra to make sure they were manufactured in the last month, and were all the same batch which made a slight difference in durability and reliability, but not enough to concern the average homeowner. Ron wasn't your average homeowner, and had money to burn, so he went the extra step to get as much reliability and life span out of his system as possible.

One change order recommended by Bear confused the heck out of the contractor, but he knew better than to ask too many questions. Bear wanted 3/8" armor plate shutters for the windows with a thin wood veneer to make them look like wood. He located an armored door built the same way and ordered it as well. The only thing that gave them away was the heavier hinges and hardware to install them. Ron quickly realized that the lodge would stop anything less than a 50BMG with the shutters closed. He thought about building a tunnel to the "root cellar" then decided that would be overkill.

With the portable sawmill, Ron got a real wood floor without the usual gaps that resulted from rustic construction techniques. Once the wood floor was installed, it was sanded smooth and sealed. The interior dividing walls that weren't weight-bearing were made using conventional framing techniques, and were 2x6 construction - and actually 2x6 not 1 5/8 " x 5 3/4". They used 3/4-inch green board, which was more expensive than conventional wallboard, but waterproof and more durable. The 2 bathrooms were designed for efficiency, since they didn't have the space to waste with huge bathrooms, so the master bathroom had a regular shower stall, a sink, and a toilet without all the extras. The other bathroom had a shower/tub combo just in case they needed a bath tub. The main floor had all cathedral open joist ceilings using milled wood. Since there were solar panels on the southern exposure of the roof, Ron decided on a steeper pitch than normal to encourage snow to slide off uncovering the panels during the winter more often so they could produce power when the sun was out. The Solar shingles made power even on partly-cloudy to cloudy days, but not as much as on a sunny day. They drilled a well, and hit good water at 100 feet, but kept drilling to 500 feet to allow for seasonal fluctuations. The septic field was buried deep to keep it from freezing in the winter.

Ron kept the solar powered pumps and the pipe for emergencies, and had the lodge plumbed conventionally, with a tap and a valve installed outside just in case. Ron knew the solar powered DC RV pumps could pump lake water 8 months out of the year reliably, so if something happened, and the lodge lost power, they would still have wood heat, and hot and cold running water 8 months out of the year. When they filled in the storage room with cabinets and shelves, the contractor told Ron he had an unused 2x2x10 space in a corner. Ron checked the internet quickly, and found a captive air tank exactly that size, so he asked the contractor if they could plumb the tank into the cold water system. Ron knew the tank was small, but it would keep the well pump from running all the time. Ron got together with the contractor, and got a list of all the little things they needed to complete the project, and called Bill to order them for pick-up in Anchorage tomorrow.

Ron flew home, and asked Nancy what they would need for furniture, rugs, etc. to decorate the “lodge” as they were calling it - it was too big for a cabin, and they already had a house. Nancy suggested leaving the kids with Anne for a couple of hours, and they could walk through it and take notes. Ron thought that was a good idea and called his mom. Anne checked with Doc Miller, and he said he had no appointments tomorrow, so it was OK with him. Anne called them back and said “Bring them on over first thing tomorrow.”

Nancy said “Thanks Mom- we’re going to look at the lodge. We need to make a list of stuff we need to furnish it. Were there any of the old furnishings you wanted - I’ll make sure we bring them back.”

“No dear, I grabbed anything that was small and of sentimental value when I moved to Allakaket, it’s your house now, feel free to do what you want to with it - I love you dear!”

“Bye Mom, love you too!”

When she hung up the phone, she wondered why she called Anne Mom until she realized that she now had 2 moms: Her Mother that bore her; and the grandmother of her children and the mother of her husband. The title “Mother” was probably Biblically more correct than the modern “Mother-in law” because they were married in Spirit as well, and she had joined Ron’s family when she took his name. She talked to Ron, and he agreed, if she was comfortable with it, he was sure Anne would approve. She went to pack an overnight bag for each kid, even though she was going to be back later that afternoon. Ron shook his head and walked off. He dreaded the day that they’d go out camping or something, Nancy would probably pack enough stuff for a Himalayan Expedition, and he’d get stuck carrying all of it!

The next morning, they packed the kids in the truck, and Ron was muttering to himself when he finally packed the last bag in the truck, then threw a bag of dog food in the truck to boot.

“Nancy, this has to stop. You’re packing 10 times the stuff they would need for 1 day at my Mom’s. If we went camping, I’d need either to drag a trailer behind us for all the stuff, or get fitted for a truss! Jake won’t need 3 changes of clothes, he’s practically potty-trained. Josh is only using 3 pairs per day, and you’ve packed a 12-pack of diapers, Sarah only used 6 diapers yesterday and you’ve packed 2 12-packs. For crying out loud, it’s too much stuff!”

“Ron, you deal with the unknown by packing your fanny pack and shoulder holster, I plan for the unknown by making sure my kids have enough stuff in case we don’t come back.”

“OK Nancy, I promise no more wolf-petting!”

“How about if the plane crashes or something?”

“Nancy, we’ve got over a year’s worth of stuff in the house in storage, and Anne drives or

someone could pick up enough stuff to last over a year, and I've already filled out a will with trust funds to take care of the kids. Look, if something happens to us, it's God's will, and I'm sure he'd take care of them. Preparedness is nice, but I think you're letting your fears get the best of you. I lived up there for 17 years, and the only time I was attacked was when we surprised a bear and Sam, who was 100% wolf by the way, died protecting me. You've got absolutely nothing to fear from that wolf. All those stories you read in the nursery rhymes were based on the European experience, and the Siberian experience. Frankly Europeans were paranoid when it came to wolves! True, I wouldn't want to take on a hungry wolf pack, alone and unarmed, but I've got a .44 Magnum on me that can kill a Grizzly with 1 correctly placed shot. A wolf wouldn't stand a chance. We were never in any danger. If I really believed that wolf was a threat, I would have shot on sight, but something told me that wolf didn't want to attack, he was defending his family. Since he was probably either a son or grandson of Sam, or one of his siblings, it would be like killing Sam, so I had to give that wolf a chance to show he wasn't dangerous. Even when I stuck out my hand, my right hand was on the butt of my Colt Anaconda, and one growl would have finished him in a heartbeat."

"Why didn't you say so?"

"You never asked - I thought you saw that, you were right behind me."

"I was too busy being scared of the wolf to notice anything."

Ron took Nancy in his arms "Nancy - I'll never let anything or anyone hurt you or the kids, you have to believe me."

Nancy broke down and cried, and when she dried her eyes, she kissed Ron "Boy have I been an idiot! I'm out there with Jeremiah Johnson, acting like a little schoolgirl. Ron, I'm sorry."

"Nancy, you weren't raised in the bush, you have a few things to learn, but I'll teach you. You already know how to shoot, and how to kill skin and gut animals for food. Fishing is a no-brainer, and I can teach you all the survival stuff you'll ever need to know just like I showed Samantha while we were stranded."

Nancy gave Ron another big hug and got in the truck - she was ready to go. Ron checked his guns and his fanny pack, and jumped in the driver's seat. 15 minutes later, they were at Grandma's house. Moose knew where he was, and practically flattened Nancy to get in the house. Jake was able to walk on his own, so Nancy set him down and he tottered into the house. Anne picked him up and gave him a big hug and kiss. Ron and Nancy carried Josh and Sarah into the house and laid them on the bearskin rug with Moose. Ron unpacked the truck, and this time Nancy suggested leaving the dog food at Anne's house. "Mom, is it OK if we leave a bag of dog food here for Moose, and when we come back later today, if you have room, maybe I can leave a bag with spare diapers and stuff so we don't have to keep lugging all these bags."

“Nancy, I already bought a bag of diapers for each of them. If you noticed last time there were still diapers left in the bag.”

“I was wondering why that happened. It seems we think alike too.”

“Years of living in the bush make me want to plan in advance and store stuff just in case.”

“Mom, what was it like living with a wolf in the house.”

“Dear, Francine dropped off Sam on our doorstep while Ron was still an infant, and I was not happy to put it mildly, but over the years I realized Ron and Sam had bonded tighter than brothers or litter mates. They did everything together, kind of like Jake and Josh sleeping with Moose. Every nap time, Ron would sack out on the bearskin with Sam. If I wanted to find Ron, I looked for Sam.”

“Did Ron tell you about that wolf encounter the other week?”

“He mentioned something, but not really - what happened?”

“We were walking toward the lake when this big wolf came out of the woods growling at us. I wanted Ron to shoot it, but he seemed to be trying to make friends with it. He got me behind him and crouched down, and the darned wolf walked over just like a dog and sniffed his hand, and then he was fine. I thought I would lose a husband. They walked to the lake, and Ron caught it a couple of fish, and fed the wolf, then he drank out of the lake and laid down, and get this - Ron petted the wild wolf like a dog! I was about ready to jump out of my skin, but the wolf seemed to enjoy it. We caught 4 more fish, and when we turned to go, the wolf trotted back into the forest as if nothing had happened.”

“Did Ron tell you there was a den there? The Wolf was just protecting his mate and pups. If he were serious about attacking you, he would have never given you a warning growl; your first hint that something was wrong would have been when he jumped one of you. Dear, in all my years up there, I’ve learned you have absolutely nothing to fear from those wolves. They’re habituated to humans, and see us as friends instead of as enemies. If he didn’t have a den close by, I doubt if you would have even seen him.”

“Ok, guess this “City Girl” has a lot to learn!”

“Nancy, not any more than I had to learn, or re-learn when I moved in with Roy. I went from being raised north of here, to living for over 10 years in Dallas, to living in Allakaket, to spending almost 20 years in the bush in a log cabin.”

“Wow, I guess you have some stories to tell - why don’t you stop by more often and we can talk. With Ron at work, the only person I can talk to is too young to respond.” Ron chose that

minute to walk in. “Mom, if you want to, I know where there’s a used 4x4 diesel pickup for sale, I’ll buy it, and you can visit us whenever you want, I’m sure Nancy would love the company, and it would give you more time with the grandkids.”

“Ok Ron, it does get a little lonely around here!”

Ron hugged his Mom, and Nancy gave her a hug, and they left since the kids were still asleep. Nancy told Anne on the way out, “We should be back before dark, see ya later Mom!”

They got in the truck, drove to the plane, and were at the lodge within a little over an hour. Nancy marveled at how beautiful the Lodge was, and was writing furiously as they walked from room to room. Finally they checked out the storage, and she crossed several items off her list and made a note next to the item to indicate it was in the storage building. When they were finished, they flew back to Allakaket and went home. They stopped at Anne’s on the way home, picked up the kids, and took them home. Ron and Nancy got on the computer, made a list, checked prices, then made some phone calls to Anchorage and Fairbanks stores. A couple of days later, they received their replies. Instead of making 2 trips, they decided the stores in Fairbanks had the better deals, and ordered most of the stuff from them. Ron called his Mom again, and asked if she would like to take the kids. Since tomorrow was Saturday, and Doc didn’t see patients on Saturday, she agreed. Remembering his promise, Ron called BA and asked him if they still had that spare diesel truck. BA said it was sitting in the yard. Ron asked if BA could do him a favor, have one of the mechanics look it over, clean it up, and deliver it to his mom’s place with a full tank of diesel. BA said sure, and thought that they should be able to deliver it in an hour or two. Ron thanked him, hung up, and called his Mom.

“Mom, one of the mechanics is going to drop off a truck for you. I’d appreciate if you could give him a lift back to the airport, then instead of us having to pack the kids up, would you mind coming over here? I’ll give you a card for the fuel pumps so you can keep it filled.”

“Ron, I don’t have a license!”

“Mom, most people around here don’t - you’ve driven an automatic before, right?”

“Yes, but it’s been almost 20 years.”

“Well take it slow the first time, and you might let the guy drive back to the airport so you don’t give him a heart attack.”

“HIM, What about Me?”

“Mom, after everything Dad and I put you through, I thought you were immune!”

“No - I can definitely say where I got these grey hairs from.”

“Ok Mom, it’s an automatic. That means to go forward put it in drive, backwards reverse. Easy on the throttle, easy on the brake. You don’t have to set any speed records getting here, besides, it’s just 5 miles from your house to ours, and just one turn - the left at the end of Main Street. It’s the last road on the left, then we’re the last house on the road. Main Street dead-ends just after our turn, so you can’t miss it. See you bright an early tomorrow Mom!”

“Nancy, I gave Mom the spare truck we had at the shop, someone’s going to check it out and drive it over to her place this afternoon, so she’ll come over here tomorrow to baby sit.”

“Smart move Ron, that way she’ll have no excuse from now on for not coming by and visiting.”

Chapter 16 - Shop till You Drop

Anne showed up at 7:00 the next morning, and once the kids were settled, Ron and Nancy got into their truck and drove to the airport. 2 hours later they were in Fairbanks. Ron hired a cab, and they drove to the Home Furnishing Store. They were greeted by the Assistant Manager, who was told to expect them. They got the red carpet treatment, so Ron thought that someone had tipped them off about whom he was. He didn't mind, but didn't let it go to his head either. A stock boy accompanied them to push the cart, get the merchandise down from the shelves, and Ron guessed, to polish their shoes if necessary. By the time they were finished, they had ordered almost 10 thousand dollars worth of furniture, furnishings, and stuff. The Assistant Manager offered them free delivery. Ron asked if the truck could meet them at the airport, and gave him their stall number where the TurboGoose was parked, and asked if they could include 2 people to load the plane. He didn't see any problem, and told them the delivery truck would be loaded and meet them at the plane in an hour. Ron used his Allakaket Airlines credit card to pay for the bill, and they took a taxi back to the airport.

Half an hour after they arrived at the plane, a huge cube van with a bobtail lift painted with the store logo pulled up next to them, and the driver handed Ron a packing list which he checked against the store receipt. Everything was on the list, so he just went by the packing list as they loaded the plane, checking off each item as it was loaded. Since they bought multiple items, and the items were in sealed boxes with the contents listed outside, he just had to check off the box, which didn't take as long. The boxes and furniture barely fit into the plane, so Ron was glad he had removed the seats the night before, or they would have had problems. Once the plane was loaded, and he signed for the delivery, he gave the driver and each of the loaders a \$10 tip, then taxied up to the fuel pumps and filled the tanks full of JP-5 with his fuel card. Once they were airborne, Ron called ahead and had one of their bush pilots fly 2 baggage handlers to their lodge. They arrived 10 minutes before Ron did, and they unloaded the plane, carried the furniture into the lodge, and arranged it with Nancy's direction. When they finished, Ron offered to fly them back, but they'd have to ride in jump seats instead of regular seats. Since they'd rather get home than wait for the bush pilot to fly back then fly them home, they agreed, and Ron mounted the webbed sling-style jump seats to the cabin walls. It wasn't the most comfortable way to fly, but it beat walking or waiting for another 2 hours. When they landed, Ron handed each of them a \$100 check and told them it was a bonus, and thanked them. They were happy since they had made their full day's salary for about 3 hours worth of work, plus a \$100 tax-free bonus. When they got back to the office, they punched out and went home, since it was quitting time.

Ron and Nancy arrived home, and Anne told them everything was OK, and the kids were asleep with Moose, then she took Ron aside and explained that she needed some help learning to drive, and asked if Ron could drive around with her for an hour. Nancy went into the house with the kids while Ron and Anne walked out to her truck.

“Mom, is there something I should know about?”

“I almost hit 3 mailboxes on my way up here, I’m not sure my vision is good enough to drive.”

“Mom, I hate to say this but maybe you need glasses.”

They walked back into the house, and he printed up an eye chart off the internet, then paced off 20 feet, turned around and had her read it. She could barely read the 20/60 line.

“Mom, that confirms it - you’re probably nearsighted from all that needlework. The nearest optometrist is in Anchorage. You should make an appointment, and I’ll fly you there. Let’s leave your truck here for now, and I’ll drive you home.”

Anne hugged her son “Thanks Ron, you’re an Angel.”

“You might want to confirm that with Nancy!”

They both had a good laugh, and Ron told Nancy he was driving his mom home. When he came back, he wasn’t home 10 minutes when the phone rang.

“Ron, I made an appointment for tomorrow at 10:00, is that OK?”

“Sure mom, I’ve got the seats out of the TurboGoose, you mind flying right seat?”

“You mean up front with you?”

“Sure, why not?”

“OK dear, see you at 7:00 tomorrow.”

“See ya then mom!”

“Nancy, I need to fly my mom to Anchorage tomorrow for an eye appointment, is there anything we need while I’m there?”

“Nope, we’re all set. If she can get them tomorrow, you might want to wait for her to get her glasses at a one-hour shop.”

“OK, we should be home before dark, and if not, I’ll call you.”

Ron went into the living room and was promptly attacked by 3 kids and a dog. Moose wanted to knock him over and lick him to death, Jake wanted to use him for a Jungle Gym; Josh and Sarah just wanted him to tickle them and hold them. 2 hours later Ron was ready for a nap.

Nancy said that dinner was ready, and he thought “Saved by the Bell!” Jake and Josh were put in high chairs, and Sarah got a bottle. Nancy fed the kids first, then Ron. Actually Ron fed Jake and Nancy fed Josh, but he didn’t see the point in feeding either of them, since the bulk of their food went on their face, in their hair, or on the floor. Ron said “Talk about messy eaters!”

Sarah was a perfect angel and lay next to Moose with her bottle. She might have been weaned, but still got a bottle at dinner since she was small for her age, and there were more nutrients in the bottle than in your average jar of baby food.

Once the kids were fed and the mess cleaned up, the adults ate while Moose baby sat. He had learned not to sit on the kids, and was a really good babysitter now. Roy said grace and they ate quickly while it was relatively quiet. Later that evening, after the kids were asleep, Ron and Nancy were talking in bed.

“Ron, that Lodge you built is really an overgrown bug-out shelter isn’t it?”

“Bear and I had talked about it, and yes, several features have been added or improved to make it a very defensible location, but still I wanted it to also be a summer lodge. That’s why we bothered furnishing it so we could spend summers there. I can run the airlines from there as well as here, and when the kids are older, the lodge by the lake will be a perfect summer and fall lodge.”

“What about the wolves?”

“My guess is we’ll never have to worry about them again, and might even get a runt deposited on our doorstep sometime. Those wolves still see us as family. The wolf last week didn’t recognize me because we had been gone so long, but I’m sure that my smell was familiar to him in a sense. Anyway, wolves are pretty harmless unless you do something stupid or they are starving. Bears on the other hand, or wolverines are something to watch out for. As soon as the kids are old enough, they need to learn how to shoot, and you need to be able to shoot a .44 Magnum. Your .45 is great for around town, but isn’t the best weapon against a big huge Grizzly Bear. I wonder what Mom did with Dad’s shoulder holster and guns. I’ll have to ask her tomorrow.”

“Goodnight dear.”

“Night Nancy!”

The next morning, Ron helped feed the kids, then they ate breakfast. He hurried out the door at 6:45, and was at his mom’s house at 0700. She grabbed her bags, locked the door and hurried out to the truck. They made small talk all the way out to the plane. He knew something was bothering his mom, so he asked her “Mom, is everything all right?”

“I’m a little nervous, I’ve never flown up front before, and I’m definitely scared of heights.”

“That’s OK mom, you’re in an enclosed cockpit, and the only way you have to worry about how high you are is if we crash, and if we do, it doesn’t matter if you’re 50 or 5,000 feet up, you’re just as dead.”

“Thanks for the reassuring thought!”

“Mom, if it’s your time to go, there’s not a whole lot you can do about it, and if it’s not, then you have nothing to worry about!”

“You’re pretty smart for a kid!”

“You’re not so bad for a Geezer-ette yourself.”

“Who you calling an Old Geezer?”

“If the shoe fits Mom!”

“Just because I’m blind as a bat and knit all day doesn’t make me old!”

“I guess this means you won’t be needing those cats then!”

They both started laughing, and they reached the plane. Ron helped his mom into the cockpit door, then closed it, and did a walk around. Everything checked out, so he got in and taxied to the pumps, topped off the tanks, and taxied to the lake. Anne was fascinated by all the dials, levers and switches Ron was manipulating. Finally he called on the radio for clearance.

“Allakaket One requesting clearance for take off.”

“Allakaket one, hold for inbound traffic, 5 minutes.”

“Roger, holding for inbound, please advise when clear to take off.”

“Roger, tower out.”

Ron had to wait for an inbound flight to land, a very rare occurrence in Allakaket. He could see a small Cessna Amphibian on final. 5 minutes later, it had landed, and taxied off the lake. The tower gave him clearance, and he took off. Ron decided to give his Mom a thrill, and did a Max Performance take-off. Once he was airborne, he looked at his Mom, and she was as white as a ghost and breathing hard. “Mom, you OK?”

“Son, you just scared 20 years out of me - good thing I went to the bathroom before I left, or

you might have needed to clean the seat.”

“Sorry Mom, I thought you’d like to see what the plane could do.”

“Ron, just take it easy from here on out - I’m not as young as I once was.”

“OK. Mom, I was going to ask you what happened to Dad’s Anaconda, 22/45, and the shoulder holster?”

“I’ve got it in a box at home - why?”

“I was talking to Nancy the other day about our lodge, and realized she didn’t have anything bigger than the .45 if we spent the summer up there.”

“Ron, she can have my set.”

“Thanks for offering, but I was thinking about wearing Dad’s set, and giving Nancy mine.”

“Ron, for now let’s give Nancy my set, and when Jake gets old enough, he can have Roy’s set.”

“Ok mom, if you’re sure.”

“It’s just your dad’s guns have a sentimental value to them, they saved my life more than once, and it’s the thing I associate most with your father.”

“Mom, if I weren’t flying the plane, I’d give you a big hug - I don’t know if I’ve told you lately how much I love you!”

“I know son, we’ve always been close, but thanks for telling me!”

They spent the rest of the flight catching up, and when he got close enough, Ron called for landing clearance. Since he was now a commercial airliner, he had to wait like everyone else, but made it in without too many delays. They took a taxi to the optometrists’ office, and Anne went in. Half an hour later, the doctor called Ron in. “Son, have a seat and look at this wall chart. I need to find out something. Ok, now read the 20 line, left eye only.”

Ron read the 20 line with both eyes, forwards and backwards, then the 19, 18 and 17 lines.

“Ron, your vision is amazing, and it explains why your 60-year old mother has excellent vision. All she needed to see the 20/20 line was a minor correction for astigmatism. She has virtually no myopia or other vision problems people her age have. When she mentioned that you were a pilot and sharpshooter, I just had to check my theory. For some reason excellent vision tends to run in your family. I highly doubt you’ll need glasses until you’re well into your

60's or 70's. You're slightly farsighted, but not excessively so. You would have made one heck of a fighter pilot."

"I know doc, I was bound for the Air Force Academy until Congress disbanded the Air Force. My uncle is Colonel Steve Fellows, and you might know my other uncle Ron Fellows."

"The name rings a bell, but I can't place them. Anyway the Air Force would have killed someone to get you behind the stick of a fighter plane with vision like that, and the fact that you're already a commercial pilot - oh well, their loss!"

Ron got up, shook the doctor's hand, and walked out to the lobby where Anne waited. The receptionist told her of an excellent 1-hour shop where they could get her prescription filled. She also had a prescription for reading glasses if she wanted them with a +2 diopter magnification. They took a cab to the lab, and 1 hour later, she had both prescriptions filled. When she put on her regular glasses, she almost cried. Her vision was like it was in her 30's, maybe she could go shooting again. She mentioned that to Ron, and he was on the phone to Elmendorf, and asked the Gunny if he had a Remington 700 or an M -24 laying around that they could use for an hour. Gunny said "sure come on over" and Ron asked his mom if she wanted to go shooting at Elmendorf. Her ear-to-ear grin answered his question for him. The cab dropped them off at the gate, and Gunny was waiting with his hummer on the other side.

"Gunny, I'd like you to meet my Mom. Mom, this is Gunny."

"Ma'am, it's a pleasure to finally meet you - Ron's kind of a legend around here."

"Gunny, I'm not as good of a shot as my son, but I finally got some glasses, and I can see like I used to when I was 30, and I wanted to check something out."

"Gunny, could you have a runner set some targets out at the 600 yard line for us?"

"Already taken care of Ron. When you mentioned the 700 or the M -24, I thought you'd want to shoot at 600 instead of 1,000 yards. I located 2 M-24's that have just gone through their arsenal rebuild and are the most accurate guns on the base. I've got a 50-cal ammo can full of M -118 Sniper Match ammo set aside as well."

"Thanks Gunny."

They drove out to the range, and Gunny already had everything set up, including tarps, shooting pads, ear and eye protection, and the rifles and ammo. Ron and Anne both walked up to their shooting lanes and got ready. Ron said "Ladies first", so Anne got ready to shoot while Gunny set up a spotting scope behind them. When Anne got behind the M -24, she was amazed at how sharp the image of the target was in her scope. The image was steady too, thanks to the Harris bipod fitted to the forend of the gun. She loaded a mag, cycled the action, cleared the safety,

then looked over at Ron, who gave her a thumbs up, and she got ready to shoot. She took 3 deep breaths, blew out half the 3rd one, and held her breath while she gently squeezed the trigger. Her first round went right through the X-ring at 600 yards, and she cycled the bolt, and concentrated on trying to put the other 4 rounds through the x-ring as well. Gunny could see through his scope that Ron's mom was almost as good of a shot as he was, and was an exceptionally good shot for a 60-year old woman too. She was very pretty, and if he weren't already married, he would have asked her out. When she locked the bolt open, Ron took over, and quickly shot 5 rounds, then the runner ran down to pull the targets. Gunny's chin hit his chest when the calculator showed that Anne had shot a 5 inch group, and Ron had shot a 4-inch group out of an unfamiliar gun. Now he knew where Ron got his shooting ability!

"Excuse me, Mrs. Williams, but I was wondering where you learned to shoot like that?"

"My Brother was Ron Fellows. He was a sniper in Vietnam."

"Can't say I heard his name, but if you were taught to shoot by a Vietnam sniper, you were taught right. I'm pretty sure some of both of your ability is genetic, because wonder-kid here has got the brass at the Pentagon scratching their heads, because only 1 in 10 of their best snipers can match his groups with the new suppressed Barrett rifle." Gunny hoped he didn't just reveal a Secret project, then remembered that if Ron did this when he was a kid, she would have known enough to sign the permission forms.

Ron spoke up "Gunny, Snipers are by and large good shots, but excellent in field craft. While I can shoot the left eye of a fly at 1,000 yards, I doubt I could become a sniper. I don't have the patience or the motivation to crawl through 1,000 yards of brambles to take out an enemy general with 1 shot, I'd rather drop a JDAM on him from 10,000 feet!"

Gunny laughed his head off at that one. He had heard Ron was going to go to the Academy before Congress destroyed the Air Force. That was a crying shame, because that kid would have been one heck of a fighter pilot. He had nerves of steel and practically x-ray vision. He wondered sometimes when the kid's cape was going to come back from the cleaners. They shot for a couple more hours, and finally Anne was tired and wanted to go home. She had shot over 100 rounds, and none of them strayed outside the 10-ring. Gunny walked up to her and said "Ma'am, May I shake your hand, that was an excellent demonstration of shooting."

"Thanks Gunny, I'm glad I got the chance."

Gunny looked at Ron and asked him "Do you have any kids?"

"Yeah, I've got 3 and another on the way, why?"

"If they can shoot half as well as you, you could start your own shooting team. I'd get them started as soon as possible."

“I was already planning on it Gunny. Thanks for the advice.”

Gunny drove them back to the gate, and they called a cab back to the airport. Anne was visibly tired, and Ron had to help her into the aircraft. He realized his mom wasn't young anymore, and that thought scared him, so he didn't dwell on it. He walked around the aircraft, then taxied to the pumps and filled up. Once he was at the end of the runway, he called the tower and requested clearance to take off. Since it was later in the day, he was given immediate clearance, so he took off and flew home to Allakaket. Anne slept most of the way home, and woke up when they descended to land. Ron took it easy and greased the landing, then taxied up to the airport, filled the tanks, and parked the plane, then helped her out.

“Mom, I'll take you home, then we'll drop your truck off tomorrow.”

“That sounds like a plan son, I just want to go to bed. All that excitement took a lot out of me.”

Ron dropped his mom off and drove home. Nancy met him at the door and gave him a hug and a kiss, then the kids and the dog mobbed him. “Welcome Home” he thought to himself.

Chapter 17 - Sky Angel

Ron woke at 0300 to use the bathroom and check on the kids. Jake and Josh were sound asleep, but when he went to check in on Sarah, she was face down. Fearing the worst, he turned on the light, rolled her over, and she wasn't breathing. He yelled for Nancy, and checked her pulse. Sarah had a pulse, thank God, but she was cyanotic and not breathing. He immediately started Rescue Breathing on his infant daughter, praying she would wake up. After 2 minutes of Rescue Breathing and the most earnest prayers Ron had said in many years, he heard his daughter cry. Nancy came in with the paramedic bag and the cordless phone. He told her to dial Doc Miller, wake him up and tell him they were on the way in with an infant with breathing problems. Ron stayed with Sarah since he was a certified Paramedic, while a very panicked Nancy grabbed the kids and Moose and threw them into the truck. On the way in, Ron called Anne, and she somehow made it to the clinic minutes after them. Doc took Sarah out of Ron's hands, and rushed her into the examining room. Ron thought he had better call BA just in case, and BA apologized for his grumpy manner as soon as Ron told him Sarah was very sick. Doc Miller came out to the waiting room half an hour later.

"Ron, Nancy, I'm not going to sugar coat this, your daughter is very sick. Somehow I missed it last time, but she has a hole in her heart, and it requires surgery to fix."

"Doc, is this an emergency or can it wait?"

"Ron, the sooner your daughter has the surgery, the better. I've got her stable for now, but she's intubated and on O2. Anne's a qualified flight nurse, and Alaska Regional Hospital can take you right in, they have a runway right up to the ER doors. I've transferred her to a medical bassinet, and she's warm, breathing and comfortable. I'll call ahead, and they'll be waiting for you."

Ron called BA, who said "I'll come over to the clinic and take care of Jake, Josh, and Moose for you, just take care of Sarah." They quickly unloaded Josh, Jake and Moose, and left them with Doc Miller. They loaded Anne Sarah, and Anne's Paramedic kit into the truck, and Ron drove to the airport. BA had alerted them that he was coming to the airport, and needed to take off ASAP. One of the mechanics pre-flighted the plane, topped off the fluids, and parked it with the turbines running. They helped Ron, Nancy, Anne and Sarah into the plane, and helped Anne buckle Sarah's bassinet into the seat belt. Doc left Sarah wired for the EEG, and switched to the portable unit which included an auto-defibrillator. The medical bassinet contained a respirator, warming circuits, and everything else they needed to transport a critically ill infant. The State of Alaska had recently upgraded the equipment at the State Clinics, since they weren't equipped as ER's. Ron searched his database, and located all the information for Alaska Regional Hospital, and entered the coordinates into the navigation system. It was still dark out, so Nancy was flying right seat, and they configured the plane for take-off as they taxied to the lake. They called the tower, and received emergency clearance. The tower told them they

would notify Anchorage Control about the Medical Emergency flight, and they should be able to fly straight in. Ron turned to Nancy and said “OK, let’s see what these new turbines can do.”

Once he was at 500AGL, he reduced the rate of climb, but accelerated to max speed, trading altitude for airspeed. He never got much above 1,000 feet all the way, and ran the turbines as fast as they could go. He averaged just over 300 knots with the new turbines, and the gauges stayed in the green for the whole flight. Ron was glad Nancy had to concentrate on the instruments, so she didn’t have time to worry about her baby. When he was 20 minutes out, he called the Alaska Regional Hospital direct on the radio, explaining they were transporting a critically ill infant, and needed clearance to land. Doc had called ahead, and they were expecting him. The runway was long enough so he could do a high-speed approach, and land at 120 knots. He didn’t know what kind of shape his daughter was in, but wanted to get her on the ground as fast as possible, and into the hands of a pediatric cardiologist and a cardiac surgeon as fast as he could. 15 minutes later he called final, and followed the ILS glide slope down to a perfect high-speed landing. Once he was on the ground, he chopped the throttles and reversed the props to a stop next to the ambulance entrance, where a team was waiting for them. Once the props stopped turning, they opened the side door and bundled little Sarah onto the gurney and rushed her into the ER with Anne and Nancy following close behind. Ron was directed by a ground crewman to taxi away from the entrance and park the plane. Once he had shut down, the gravity of the situation took hold. His little girl’s life was in someone else’s hands. He had gotten her there alive, now it was up to the doctors and God. Ron said another fervent prayer, and climbed out of the TurboGoose and walked into the ER’s ambulance entrance. The head of Emergency Services was at his desk, and recognized Ron.

“Ron Williams - is that you?”

“Hi Doc, I just flew my little girl in, she’s got a bad heart. Any idea where they took her?”

The director turned to a nurse, then told Ron that she was in an examining room, and the staff cardiologist, a pediatric surgeon and an ER resident were working on her.

“Ron, I was amazed at that landing you did - even our planes don’t come in that fast and stop that short - what kind of plane was that?”

“It’s a custom turboprop plane called a TurboGoose. Can I tell you about it later - I really want to see my daughter.”

Anne walked up to Ron, and told him that Sarah was fine, they were scheduling her for surgery in the morning when the chief of cardiovascular surgery would be in. She was stable, and the cardiologist was keeping an eye on her. Two minutes later, Nancy showed up with the cardiologist in tow.

“Mr. Williams, I’m doctor Franks. Sarah is stable, and she’ll have surgery in the morning to

repair a small hole in her heart. Nancy told me you were a Paramedic, and started rescue breathing on her as soon as you realized she wasn't breathing."

"I woke up to use the bathroom around 3 and checked on the kids as I usually do. Jake and Josh were fine, but Sarah was face down in her crib. Thinking it might be SIDS, I turned on the light, rolled her over carefully. She had a nice strong pulse, but she wasn't breathing, and she was cyanotic. I started rescue breathing, and 2 minutes later, she started crying, which meant she was breathing. We rushed her to the clinic, and then we flew her here."

"Ron, you did everything right, now she's in our hands. She should come through the surgery OK, and after she recovers from the surgery, she'll lead a normal life. We do this surgery about a dozen times a year, and if the kid's alive when we get them, they usually live."

"Thanks Doc."

Ron gave Nancy and Anne a big hug, then called BA.

"BA, Sarah's in the hospital. They'll do the surgery this morning. Everyone's OK. I need you to activate the prayer chains, and get everyone praying for us. Can you ask Pastor Jones to meet us at the hospital chapel? Thanks - you too! God Bless!"

"Anne, Nancy, let's get a bite to eat at the cafeteria, and head over to the Chapel. BA said he would call Pastor Jones and have him meet us at the Hospital Chapel."

They walked into the cafeteria and even though they weren't hungry, they knew they would need their strength for the upcoming ordeal. After breakfast they got directions to the Hospital Chapel, where they sat and prayed together. A couple of hours later, Pastor Jones quietly joined them, announcing his presence by placing his hands on Ron and Nancy's shoulders, then he knelt with them and prayed. Since they were alone in the chapel, when they had finished, Pastor Jones gave them some good news.

"Ron, Nancy, I've activated prayer chains all over Anchorage. We have a Pastor's net that we communicate urgent prayer requests via e-mail, and by this morning every Christian Church in Anchorage is spreading the word via e-mail and phone."

"Thanks Reverend, I never imagined the word could spread so fast!"

"Ron, please call me Tom. Reverend or Pastor is OK in church, but otherwise it's too formal, and I'm uncomfortable with it."

"Ok Tom, any word?"

"I checked in with the surgical team on my way in, she's first into surgery this morning at 0800.

They've called for their best Pediatric Cardiovascular Surgeon. He's done hundreds of these surgeries. He already got a look at the Echo-Cardiogram, and this one should be a slam dunk. He said there was a small hole in the heart that allows blood to flow between chambers, making the heart work harder, and pump less efficiently. Once the hole is repaired, she should never have any more problems."

"Tom, I found her face-down and not breathing, I was assuming SIDS?"

"According to the docs, she shows no signs of SIDS, and they can't explain why she was on her face. Maybe she rolled over as she lost consciousness. Either way, I know the hand of God was on her, and you found her in the nick of time. You know that after 6 minutes, irreversible brain damage occurs. The EEG they ran shows normal brain activity, so she's fine."

Nancy started crying when she heard that, and threw herself into Ron's arms "Thanks for saving our baby!"

"Like Tom said, it was mostly God watching out for her, and allowing me to react according to my training instead of panicking."

"Still, you did everything right, you didn't panic, and you flew that plane here and made a perfect high-speed emergency landing on a fairly small runway. I love you now even more than before, and I know that if anything bad happens, you won't fold under pressure."

"Nancy, I'm still human, and I always worry that if enough pressure were applied, I'd fold. My worst nightmare is to lose you and the kids all at once. I don't know if I could deal with that!"

Tom spoke up "Ron, The Bible says "My Grace is Sufficient" and I totally believe it. I've dealt with major tragedies, and God has always given the victims enough grace to bounce back if they believe in Him."

Ron thought that called for a Group Hug, and then they were praying together and holding each other. They could each feel His presence, and they knew Sarah would be OK.

Just about then, Sarah was admitted to Surgery. Half an hour later, she was out and in the recovery room. A nurse walked into the Chapel to give them the good news, and found the four of them standing in a circle praising God. She couldn't understand why, most of the people she saw in here were weeping and wailing, asking God for a Miracle, and here these 4 were praising God like they already knew that Sarah was out of danger. She tapped the minister on the shoulder, and he said "Yes we know!"

"But Reverend - I just came out of Surgery, and no one else was sent."

"Ma'am, we already heard" and Tom pointed upward. She was amazed, and then she turned

and left, she had work to do. She talked about it the rest of the day, and several of her friends who were Christians explained it to her. She spent the rest of the week wondering why she never felt that way, then she picked up her Bible and started reading it for the first time in years.

Ron, Nancy, and Anne were admitted to the Pediatric ICU after putting on gloves, gowns, and masks. The risk of infection was too great to let her hold her child, so Nancy talked softly to her. The nurse told her that they should be taking her out of ICU within 24 hours, once they were sure she didn't contract a post-surgical infection. She told them to go home and get some sleep, they couldn't see her until tomorrow, and she was in good hands. Ron called the Inn and booked 2 rooms for the rest of the week. They said that if they needed to check out before the week was up, they would only bill him for the nights used. Ron called BA, who told him the boys were fine, and Moose wore him out playing Ball and tug-of-war. BA said to stay in Anchorage as long as they needed. He got the spare key from Bill, and grabbed a week's worth of clothing and dog food for Moose. He finally understood why Ron called him Moose, because Piglet was already taken. BA said they were going to get a dog soon, since the kids were big enough now to help. Ron thanked BA, and they walked out of the hospital. On the way out, he ran into the Director of Emergency Services. "Ron, I was glad to hear Sarah came through surgery OK. I take it you're staying in Anchorage for her recovery?"

"I booked 2 rooms at the Inn for a week just in case."

"OK, if you're planning on staying here a week, could you do me a favor and move your plane to the commercial Airport. We need every spot we have in case we get a Mass Trauma. Can I walk out with you and take a look at your plane? It seems to have the same performance as our Brasilia's, yet it's an Amphibian. That would come in very handy for some of the outlying areas we now serve with a helicopter. The chopper is a lot slower than the Brasilia, but we can land it on floats at a small lake." Ron remembered the Director's name was Steve. He used to be the Senior Paramedic for Anchorage, and when the old director retired, they gave him the job, since he was too old to be in the field, but had 30 years of experience in EMS. Ron explained the history of the planes on the way out. When he told Steve that with the new turbines, the planes had a top speed of 300 knots for 600 miles, and a 250 knot cruising speed for 1200 miles, and could land and take off on a lake that most Cessna Amphibians would have problems with, he was really interested. When he mentioned the payload capacity, Steve said "I want one!" Ron opened the passenger door and showed Steve all the cargo space, and told him it could easily be configured as an air ambulance, but the cabin wasn't pressurized, so they would have to install large capacity oxygen tanks for the patients, and not fly any higher than they had to. Ron said he rarely went over 2,000 feet AGL unless he was going to Vancouver, then he went up to 10,000 feet to gain extra range.

"You mean to tell me you get that speed and range at that low of an altitude?"

"Exactly, I never went much higher than 1,000 ft AGL when we flew Sarah here, and according to the nav computer, I averaged over 300 knots including landing and take-off. The engine

instruments remained in the green for the entire flight. I wouldn't recommend speeds in excess of 280 knots unless you're flying a Code 3 emergency, since it kills your range, and is hard on the turbines to run at almost 100% for that long. Allison is building a bunch of these new turbines for me, and the RCAF Wing 19 AMS at Vancouver BC has over a dozen airframes left that they can rebuild and retrofit to your specs for less than a half-million per copy, and usually a lot less."

"Great, can you put me in touch with this gentleman?"

"I'll send you his e-mail address when I get back, or if you're in a hurry, e-mail BA at Allakaket Airlines, and use my name, and he can give you the details."

"Thanks Ron, I'll get hold of BA today and get the info from him."

Nancy decided to ride in the back with Anne, so Ron jumped into the pilot's seat, and started the turbines, pre-flighted the plane, and called Anchorage Control for permission to transit from Alaska Regional Hospital to Anchorage International. They gave him a route to fly that would de-conflict with the pattern, and line him up for the runway. They highly suggested not flying above 500 AGL for the transit, since the pattern was pretty heavily stacked, and they wouldn't want to fly through the wake turbulence of a 747! The controller said if they could take off now, they would be able to fly right in. Ron shoved the throttles to full, and went screaming down the runway, took off in ground effect, cleaned up the plane, and told the control operator he was on final 2 minutes later. The operator said that they were clear to land, and he slowed to 80 knots, deployed the landing gear, and made a textbook landing. He taxied over to the fuel pumps, filled up the tanks, including the APU, and taxied to his assigned parking spot at Alaska Airlines since he wasn't picking up passengers. Ron was surprised when none other than Bradley Whinton III, the new CEO of Alaska Airlines was there to greet them. "Ron Williams, glad to finally meet you. BA told me about Sarah, and I'm glad she's OK. I understand you'll be staying in Anchorage for a week. I can loan you one of our vehicles for the duration of your stay. Here's the keys, it's parked right over there." Bradley shook hands all around, then had to get back to work. The vehicle he had pointed out was a brand-new F-450 turbodiesel that Alaska Airlines bought from their fleet dealer for the use of the airlines. It had been washed and vacuumed before they parked it with both tanks full. Ron was glad that BA had thought ahead, since it beat a taxi, and he really didn't want to ride around like a Potentate in a Limousine.

Chapter 18 - Redemption

They drove to the Mall first, since none of them had been able to take any clothes or toiletries. They bought 3 duffle bags and enough clothes for several days without washing, and enough toiletries to last the week. By the time they got back to the Inn, it was time for dinner, so they dropped their bags at the hotel, and walked to the diner next door. After dinner, Ron told Anne they would meet her at 0700 for breakfast so they could be at the hospital at 0800 when visiting hours started. They got settled in their rooms, then Ron and Nancy fell asleep holding each other. After breakfast, they drove to the hospital, and Sarah's condition had been upgraded overnight from Critical to Serious, which meant she could be moved out of the ICU, and Nancy could finally touch her daughter. She still was wearing a mask, but Sarah responded almost immediately to the voice and touch of her mother. She was finally off the respirator and the IV, and looked almost normal except for the suture line where they had opened her chest. The Resident told Nancy that the scar would fade with time, and she would be a perfectly normal little girl in as little as a month. Nancy was grateful just to have her little daughter. The three of them stayed in her room all day, and when the nurses said they needed to leave so Sarah could get some sleep, they reluctantly left.

On the way out, the Resident caught up with them and said that he didn't want to get their hopes up, but if she kept healing at this rate, she could leave the hospital in a couple of days. Ron asked about removing the sutures, and he assured Ron that Doc Miller was more than competent to remove them in a week or two. They didn't like to keep healthy infants in the hospital any longer than they had to, since there were a bunch of bugs floating around, and their immune systems weren't totally up to speed. Nancy said she breast fed Sarah, and the Doc said that helps, but it usually takes a year or two for a kid's immune system to come up to full speed. He would give them a list of general precautions to follow as she recovered at home. Since she had open-heart surgery, there were more precautions than normal. They all had to wear at least an N -95 mask around her for the next couple of weeks, and they should buy an ionic filter for her nursery just to be on the safe side. Ron thought that was a good idea, and decided to buy 2: 1 for the whole house, and a smaller unit for Sarah's nursery. He called BA on his cell phone, and he checked the local Anchorage stores on the internet, and found the best value. Ron wasn't surprised when BA told him which store - they had a reputation for good merchandise at the best prices in town. He could have bought it over the Internet and saved \$50 per unit, but he needed them quicker than 2 weeks that most companies said it would take.

He called the store, and they had several units in stock. The manager recommended 1 for each bedroom, and one for the living room and kitchen, especially if they had a dog. It would only cost \$200 more for 4 smaller units than 1 big one and 1 small one. The manager said the unit was totally noiseless, since it didn't have or need a fan, and it only needed cleaning once every two weeks, and it cleaned with a sponge and water. Ron asked how late they were open, and he said they normally closed the same time as visiting hours ended, 8:00 at night, but if he knew they were on the way, he'd keep the store open for them. Ron guessed for a guaranteed

\$1500.00 sale, he'd keep the store open too. He told the manager they would be there before 8:30 that night. He said that he would set aside 4 units for them, and Ron thanked him. That evening when visiting hours were over, they drove over to his shop, and he had them all boxed up and ready to go. Ron handed him his AMEX card, and the manger helped them put the units in the bed of the truck. Ron unloaded the units at the inn with the help of a clerk onto a luggage cart. He asked Anne if she wanted to use a unit tonight, and she said "No thanks, I don't suffer from allergies anymore," so Ron set up a unit in their room to try it out, and left the other 3 in the boxes. Just like the manager said, you just plugged it in and turned it on. In the morning when they checked it, the filter was filthy. That sold him right then and there. He called the manager in the morning and asked him how many of those units he had in stock. He said he had 12 left, and Ron asked him how much for the lot of them. Since he had already bought 4, and they came 20 to a case, he gave him the case price, plus his 10% markup. Ron said he'd be over there again at 8:30 that evening to pick up the rest of them.

After breakfast, they drove over to the hospital and Sarah was up and awake. Nancy walked over to her, and she practically begged her mom to pick her up. Nancy looked to the nurse, who nodded her head. Nancy picked her up like a piece of delicate china, and Sarah wrapped her arms around her mom's neck and wouldn't let go. Nancy say down in a rocking chair, and the nurse brought a bottle of formula. Nancy fed her baby, and Sarah fell asleep soon after finishing the bottle. Seeing that everything was right with his family, Ron motioned to Anne, who met him in the hall. "Mom, I can't sit here all day - Sarah and Nancy are asleep. I need to get out and do something."

"Ron, I'll stay with her and tell her you'll be back soon when she wakes up."

"Mom, here's my cell number, and I'll have the phone on, call me if you need anything." Ron handed her his business card, then took another one, and wrote the room number on the back of it, so he could call Nancy later if he didn't hear from her, or he was going to be late.

On his way down he ran into Steve. "Ron, you got a minute?"

"Sure Steve, what can I do for you?"

"I got hold of BA, and made all the connections. I need you to talk with the head of Life Flight. They've been looking for alternatives for years, but no one had though of your turboprop modification of a Grumman Goose. His name's Roger and his office is right here."

They walked into Roger's office, and since Steve was there, he ended his call, and Steve introduced Ron Williams.

"Ron Williams, where have I heard that name before"

"Roger, Ron is the owner of Allakaket Airlines; they're the feeder airline for Alaska Airlines.

He's got like 7 or 8 turboprop conversions of the Grumman Goose he calls a TurboGoose. You two need to talk, I think his conversion might be what we were looking for."

"Thanks Steve, talk to you later."

Steve closed the door, leaving Ron and Roger alone. "Ron, tell me about the TurboGoose."

"It started as a WWII Surplus Grumman Goose with twin Wasp radial engines. Basically it was a miniature Catalina PBY, and they were used for costal patrol during WWII. Grumman made them until the 1950's or so, and most of the airframes the RCAF is rebuilding are 1950's vintage airframes. It's a remodel more than a restoration, since the airframe, skin, and landing gear are about the only components left off the Goose by the time they're finished with it. Allison made some turboprop engines for it in the 50's but never installed them. I located 4 engines, had them installed in the Goose airframe, and flew them for a year or so until I got hold of Allison since I needed more planes. They couldn't believe that the engines still worked - they were test-bench units, and had never been installed in a plane. They offered to build a modern turboprop that would mount up where the old turboprops were, and get better fuel mileage and more power. They were right, because when I flew my baby from Allakaket to here the other day, I averaged 300 knots for the trip, including landing and take off. The plane is STOL capable, and can land and take off from lakes that would give a Cessna 185 Amphibian fits! With the new FAA fuel tanks, it has almost a 1500 mile range at 250 knots, a 1200 mile range at 280, and I imagine around 800-1000 mile range at max speed, since I ran the turbines at 100% from Allakaket all the way here, and did a high-speed emergency landing at 120 knots to save time. According to the flight computer, the fastest I went was just over 300 knots for almost an hour."

"Ron, that's amazing, you're plane has the same range and speed as our Brasilia's, and it's amphibious."

"Not only that, but twice the payload and cargo space. Even if you converted to an Air ambulance, you could easily carry 4 or more stretcher cases plus FAA certified seats for 4 more. One problem is the plane isn't pressurized, so you would have to install a patient oxygen system."

"That's not an issue anymore since we can carry huge quantities of liquefied O2. 1 40-pound tank can carry enough liquid O2 for 6 people for a week. They use a double-wall insulated tank, and they can be built to fit into almost any space. We use them now on our Air Ambulances for long flights since the aircraft is only pressurized to 10 thousand feet, and we can fly up to 30,000 feet."

"Ok, Roger, how would you like a test-ride?"

"You're kidding?"

“My kid’s in the hospital here and it will be another day or two before she can leave. I’m going stir crazy waiting here, since I’ve got nothing to do but wait.”

“Well in that case, let’s go. I know a small lake around here that always gives us fits.”

“Ok, Roger before I try it, you need to show me on the map, and I need to know clearances and distances.”

Roger took out a small scale topo map of the lake in question. It was about the size of HelpmeJack Lake, and didn’t have near the clearance problems, only 200 feet within a mile of the lake. Ron said “That’s an easier approach than I fly into HelpmeJack Lake!”

Roger looked up HelpmeJack Lake in his database, and asked Ron if he had a set of 3lb Brass Cajones.

“Roger, it’s not that tough, with the flaps fully extended, I can land at 50 knots, and I have reversing props that act like I threw out an anchor. And you won’t believe my rate of climb unless you see it for yourself.”

“Ok, let’s go.”

Roger walked out with Ron, and told Steve they were going for a check-ride in Ron’s plane. Steve desperately wanted to go, but he wasn’t a pilot, so he couldn’t ride up front like Roger could. They walked out, and Roger said “Ok if we take my truck?”

Ron thought it was a good idea not to leave Anne and Nancy stranded without a vehicle, so he agreed. They drove over to the airport, and Ron gave Roger directions to the Alaska Airlines private aircraft parking area. Roger was impressed by the size of Ron’s plane as they drove up next to it; it was easily twice the size of their Brasiliass. Ron unlocked the aircraft, opened the passenger door so Roger could see how big the cargo space was - Ron wasn’t kidding, they could fly 4 or even 6 stretcher cases and still have room for 4 seats up front. He walked forward to the cockpit, and it was a fully modern FAA IFR cockpit, including a really good radar set. Ron talked Roger through the pre-flight check list, called the tower, and set the plane up to take off while they were taxiing. Once he got permission, he did a max-performance climb to 2,000 feet, and Roger was grinning and shaking his head at the same time, his planes didn’t climb near this fast! Ron had input the coordinates for the lake, and half an hour later, they were overhead and Ron set up to land. Ron floated in at 50 knots, made a textbook touchdown, and since the turbines were already at idle, he flipped the reverse switch, waited a second for the props to reverse, and throttled up the turbines to 30% power. The plane stopped in the middle of the lake just like someone had thrown out an anchor. Roger was grinning like a cat that had just eaten the canary. Ron taxied to the end of the lake, and turned to take off. Once he was set, he shoved the throttles to full, and with over half the lake left, hit 80 knots and was airborne. Ron did a max-performance take-off again, and turned to Anchorage while he climbed. Half an hour

later they landed back at Anchorage and Roger was practically jumping up and down in his seat he was so excited. He taxied to the Alaska Airlines private terminal, shut down, and Roger was still grinning from ear to ear.

“Ron, you convinced me! We’ll want at least 2 planes as soon as they can be built. With this plane, we could retire half of our helicopter fleet, and just keep the Jet Rangers.”

Curious, Ron asked what helicopters they were getting rid of.

“We’ve got the “hangar queen” a Sikorsky S-80 Super Stallion that is configured for Search and Rescue with a winch, extended fuel pods, and a bunch of other stuff. It can also do water drops since it can sling load around 30,000 pounds and travel 200 miles one way with it. Problem is its maximum speed is only 150 knots. We just had the engines rebuilt and we got an air-worthiness cert good for another 5 years on the airframe.”

“Roger, would you consider a trade for a cargo configured TurboGoose?”

“You’re serious?”

“We’ve been utilizing a CH-47 for the last couple of years for everything, and he’s been carrying everything from Anchorage to Allakaket that we can’t fit inside the TurboGoose. He’s got about twice the lifting capacity of the Super Stallion, and it’s really costly to run. I wanted to buy another couple of TurboGoose planes anyway. I’m not going to give you a brand new plane, because obviously your Super Stallion has been around the block for a few. I’ve got a reserve plane in Allakaket that’s configured for cargo with a full avionics suite including radar that I’d consider trading for your Super Stallion. It’s only got a couple of hundred hours on the engines since it’s a reserve plane. I need to confirm this with BA before we agree, since he’s my business manager.”

“Who’s BA?”

“Sorry, that’s what I call Bill Avery; he used to be the CEO of Alaska Airlines, now he’s my business manager.”

“Ok sounds like a deal, if we can do it, I’d definitely be interested in a trade. Here’s my card.

“Roger, I need a lift back to the hospital - remember, my truck’s parked there.”

“Sorry Ron, I was getting so carried away, I forgot.”

They jumped into his pickup, and they were back at the hospital parking lot in a matter of minutes. Ron said he needed to check on his kid, and would talk to him later. Roger shook his hand, and Ron walked as quickly as he could back to Sarah’s room. Sarah was still asleep in

Nancy's arms, and Anne was sitting down reading a book. As he opened the door, Anne looked up, put her finger to her lips, got quietly up, and walked to the doorway; evidently she wanted to talk outside.

"Ron the doc was by, he said we could take her home tomorrow, but he gave me a long list of precautions and stuff we need. You'll have to get it this afternoon. Here's the list. Nancy and Sarah are sleeping, the nurse said to let them sleep like this, it's the best sleep Sarah's got since she's been here, and they stopped giving her sedatives in her IV to help her sleep."

"OK Mom, I'll get this stuff and I'll be back in a couple of hours. Bye!" Ron gave his mom a hug, and walked back down the corridor. Steve was in his office, so Ron had a brilliant idea. Ron knocked on his door, and Steve waved him in.

"Ron, I talked to Roger, and I think that idea of yours to trade a TurboGoose for the S-80 was a really good idea. We got the helicopter from the state over 10 years ago, and only used it twice. It's taking up hangar space, and costing us a lot of money to keep it maintained. I know it's worth way more than one of your planes, but we're not using it, and you would be doing us a big favor by taking it off our hands."

"Steve, that's great, but not why I'm here. They're releasing Sarah to come home tomorrow, but I have a huge list of medical supplies they want us to buy before we take her home, and I was hoping you could tell us where to get it."

Ron handed Steve the list "Ron, I've got all this right here - and I could give it all to you, it's all stuff a Paramedic would need anyway."

"Can't do that Steve - technically it's for personal use since Sarah's my daughter."

"She's also an Alaskan Native and entitled to free medical care at the clinic, and that includes all the supplies she would have used. Tell you what, I'll just charge you our cost on this list, and add it to your bill. If you were to buy this at a local medical supply company, they'd charge you 5-10 times our cost."

"Thanks Steve. I've got a couple of errands to run, so if you could have someone bag all this up, I'll pay you on my credit card when I get back this afternoon - I need to pick up some more Ionizing air filters."

"Where you buying them?"

Ron told him, and also how much he was charging him. Steve knew the hospital could get them for half that price, and told Ron, except they didn't have any in stock, it was an order item. Ron asked him what the price was for a dozen of them. Steve quoted half the price Ron would have paid if he bought them in town. He flipped open his cell phone, hit recall until the store number

came up, and dialed. He told the manager the bad news, and he asked where Ron was getting them so cheap “My friend is in the hospital Administration, and I’m an Alaska Paramedic, so he’s selling me some medical gear at cost, since it’s for patient use.”

The manager told Ron he couldn’t match that price, it was below his cost. Ron said he knew, and was calling to thank him, and tell him that he wasn’t going to be in so he wouldn’t wait up. The Manager thanked him, and they hung up.

“Steve, those units come in a case of 20 according to the store manager, so if you can order an entire case of them at that price, I’ll pick them up the next time I’m in Anchorage.”

“Hopefully you’ll be able to fly home in the Super Stallion.”

“Steve, I’m not rotary qualified. This deal will have to wait until I’ve got a qualified pilot. Speaking of which, can I use your phone, I just had an idea that might speed things up.”

“By all means, the sooner we get a TurboGoose the better.”

Ron dialed Bear’s number. He started saying “Chief Simmons, this is an unsecured line.” And Ron started laughing. Finally he realized why Ron was laughing and who was on the other end of the phone. “Real Funny Ron, I’ve had a long day. Mary’s pregnant again, and I’m babysitting. What can I do for you?”

“Bear, how would you like to be able to use a Sikorsky S-80 helicopter that’s configured for SAR and can lift 36,000 pounds on it’s cargo hook.”

“Ron, I couldn’t really use one in the survival school, but I do know where we could, and it would be busy 24/7 - the gold mine. We badly need a crane up there to lift and move stuff, and to carry fuel from Anchorage to here.”

“Would it be worth trading a TurboGoose for it?”

“Ron, if it’s in flying condition, it’s worth 10 times a TurboGoose.”

“That’s what I thought. Do you know any pilots that are current in the S-80?”

“What’s the military designator?”

“Steve, what’s the military designator of the S-80?”

“It’s called a Super Stallion in the Navy, and if I remember correctly, it still has the USN paint job with the ID numbers blacked out.”

“Bear, according to Steve, it’s a Super Stallion.”

“Ron that would be the CH-53E Super Stallion, it’s a huge workhorse that can lift over 36,000 pounds with a 480 mile range. It would be perfect for what we would need to compliment the CH-47. I know several Navy pilots that are current in the Super Stallion and about to retire with their 20.”

“Bear, check them out, and if they’re interested, offer them a job working for Allakaket Airlines, specifically for the mine, but we might need cargo flights. Negotiate a salary for him, but make sure it’s less than I’m paying you.”

“Aye, Aye Sir!”

Ron broke the connection, and turned to Steve. “Bear’s a Navy Chief and an Ex-Seal, he said he had someone in mind, and if he takes the offer, we could do the trade within 30 days. I need to have our mechanic look it over, and our pilot. I’ll extend the same courtesy to you.”

“Thanks Ron, I’ll have someone bag up the stuff and you can pick it up on your way down.

Chapter 19 - Homecoming

The next day, they drove to the hospital, and Sarah was ready to come home. She was wearing an infant sized filter mask, since it was easier to put one on her instead of everyone within 6 feet of her. They bundled her in a warm blanket and a windproof cover, and handed her to Nancy. She decided Ron could fly the plane by himself, she was carrying Sarah home. Anne picked up the bags of stuff that Steve had packed for them, and they loaded everyone in the truck for the ride to the airport. Nancy was very happy to have her baby back and out of the hospital. They had given Anne a mountain of paperwork to read and follow. Ron flew much more sedately home than he had coming to the hospital, and made a very soft landing in Allakaket. BA was there to greet them and welcome them home. Sally had Josh and Jake with them, and Moose was on a leash. BA told Ron they would meet them at Ron's house, since he didn't want Sarah's brothers or Moose to disturb her. Ron thought that was an excellent idea, and he dropped his mom off first, drove home, put Sarah down in her crib, plugged in the Ionic filter, and closed the door. Sarah needed her sleep, and looking at Nancy, she could use a nap too. She looked drained by the experience. BA showed up 15 minutes later with his boys and the moose. Ron could have sworn Jake grew while he was gone, and was amazed how well Jake was walking. Even Josh was trying to imitate his older brother, but it would be almost a year before he was able to walk on his own, but man could he crawl!

They had just settled down when the phone rang. Ron answered it, and found out it was Bear with news about the Super Stallion.

"Ron, I was talking to the pilot for the Super Stallion about what we wanted to do with it, and he told me for precision lifts, he needed most of his crew, including the co-pilot and the crew chief. Luckily they are all ready to retire, and he said that they would basically follow him into Hell. He liked the idea, and said that he could work for \$75K per year, since that's what he could make as a civilian helicopter pilot flying the Civilian S-80. he's fully qualified including SAR and firefighting, as well as his co-pilot, who he said would work for \$75K as well. The Crew chief should get \$50K since he's an Enlisted man according to the pilot. He's got an entire maintenance crew lined up. All in all we'd be hiring 7 people to get the Sikorsky. For all the work they can do year round, it would be worth it. Also the Super Stallion uses JP-5 instead of JP-4, and I'll check on the difference and get back to you."

"Bear, how much will all this personnel cost us per year?"

"Right around \$400K per year."

"How much should we make per year using the chopper?"

"I'd say we could double our production if we used it as a sky crane."

“Ok, you’re bringing in \$1 Million per year, so that would mean \$2 million per year in income?”

“Minus expenses - it’s expensive to keep the Super Stallion flying.”

“Ok, what does that do to our bottom line?”

“We’re clearing about \$500K per year after all expenses just from the mine, I guess it could go between \$800K and \$1 Million, besides we can use the Super Stallion for any hauling job below 36K pounds, and it only costs half the amount of dollars per hour to run compared to the Chinook Ch-47. That alone could count for another \$200-300K.”

“Ok Bear, you make the call, but it sounds like a good deal, If we trade for a TurboGoose, we’ve only got \$200K into the TG, and that Super Stallion is worth how much?”

“If it’s flying and certified, \$10 Million easy!”

“Just based on that alone, I can tell you we should do it!”

“I agree Ron. I’ll call the pilot and give him the good news.”

“Bear, can they get to Anchorage to check out the chopper, and if it passes their inspection, we’ll hire them, and if not, we’ll pay his expenses, plus say \$10K for his trouble, and he can pay his maintenance chief and everyone else he brings with him out of that.”

“Sounds like a deal Ron, his expenses will be negligible since he’ll fly via MAC to Elmendorf, and take a taxi to where ever the chopper is.”

Ron called BA, and asked him about the JP-4 vs. JP-5 problem, and he said the fuel company always replaced JP-4 with JP-5 since they were so close in composition, and the JP-5 was safer and worked better in cold environments. Ron thought “Well, that answers that question!” BA told Ron that JP-4 was the old Air Force Fuel that was replaced by JP-8, and JP-5 was current US Navy fuel, so instead of delivering JP-4, they always delivered JP-5, which was more stable and able to tolerate cold better. Ron thought that was as clear as mud, but didn’t argue or question it. He thanked BA for the info, then called Bear. “Bear, never mind, BA said the fuel company has been delivering JP-5 for years instead of JP-4, so there is no problem.”

Ron called Steve at Alaska Regional Hospital and gave him the good news. Steve told Ron he ordered the ionic filters, and they would be in stock in a week. As soon as Steve hung up, Bear called, and the pilot’s entire crew decided to go with him, including his maintenance chief and 2 mechanics. The total was 7 additional personnel as he had told Ron. They could be in Elmendorf within a week, as soon as their paperwork was processed. Ron thanked Bear and called Steve back. He said that they could have the Super Stallion ready for inspection when

they got there - just make sure they called first so they could tow it out of the hangar. Ron told him that if they could work out the paperwork between now and then, he could fly a TurboGoose out and trade them right then and there if everyone was happy. Steve put Ron on hold for a second and told Roger the good news. Roger said that they'd get all the FAA paperwork together on the chopper, so all they would have to do is sign the bills of sale and they were done. Steve told Ron what Roger told him, and he said he would bring the paperwork including a set of manuals for the TurboGoose. Steve made a note to remind Roger to include all the manuals in the paperwork. He thanked Ron, and said he hoped to hear from him again soon.

A week later Ron got a call from someone named Hammer. Ron guessed he was the pilot of the Super Stallion, they were at Elmendorf, and needed directions to where the Super Stallion was hangared. Ron told them where it was, and he would be airborne in half an hour, and to call him on his Sat phone. Ron gave him the number, and they disconnected. He called Steve real quick, said his team was en-route from Elmendorf, and the pilot's name was Hammer. He would be airborne in half an hour, and to call him on the Sat phone if he had any questions. Ron called BA and gave him the good news, then called Bear and gave him the same message. Bear thought Ron would enjoy the sensation of swinging from a chandelier during an earthquake for 2 hours, but thought it would be worth it to see the look on his boss's face when he landed. They had plenty of JP-5 in stock to refill the tanks of the Super Stallion so they could give Ron a lift home. When he was done, he called Nancy and told her he was flying to Anchorage to swap a TurboGoose for a big helicopter. Nancy didn't understand what the big deal was, and told him, "Ok, see you later tonight!" On the flight over, his Sat phone rang, it was Hammer.

"Ron, the bird checks out, it's sweet and in great shape for a hangar queen. All the maintenance is current, and my crew chief said it's good to fly now."

"Hammer, what was your crew chief's estimate for annual maintenance costs?"

"Assuming we don't have a turbine go bad, maybe \$50-100K per year. If a Turbine goes bad, they cost a quarter-mill a piece."

"How often do you loose one?"

"Maybe once or twice in the lifespan of the airframe."

"How much longer on this chopper?"

"It's hard to say, but you should be good to go for the next 5-10 years since they just did a major rebuild."

"Ok, Hammer I'll be there in about half an hour. Is Steve there - I need to know where they

want me to put this bird down.”

“Steve Here! Ok, just fly to the same landing strip as last time you landed at the hospital, then the ground crewmen will direct you to the hangars and maintenance facility where we are.”

“Ok Steve, see you in about 20 minutes.”

When Ron landed, a ground crewman waving wands directed him to taxi to the right, and he saw the hangars and maintenance yard about a quarter-mile away. He pulled the plane up to a stall and shut down. He started removing his personal gear including his survival kits, and his paramedic bag, and left everything else including the radio and cellular repeaters since they were permanently installed.

Ron showed Steve and Roger everything in the aircraft, including the repeaters. Roger asked Steve if they could take the plane up for a test flight. Ron said they could fly to that lake and back like last time. Steve jumped into the passenger seat, buckled himself in, and said he was good to go. Ron got permission to take off, programmed the nav computer, and set up for take off. He asked Roger if he wanted to do another Max performance take-off, and he admitted that was why Steve was flying since he couldn't believe that any plane could take off faster than their Brasilia. Ron got an evil grin, and as soon as he had clearance, he maxed the throttle, and pulled up radically, and held it until he was at 2000 ft. Once he was over the lake, he pulled a wingover and dove for the water, bottoming out at 500 ft AGL, and cranked the flaps out as quickly as he could. He landed at 50 knots, and threw the props to reverse, and stopped just like he had thrown out an anchor. He taxied to the end of the lake, turned around, and did another max performance take-off. He flew back to the hospital's runway, and did a more sedate landing. They taxied back to the hangars, and Hammer's eyes were as big as saucers.

“Holy Cow Ron, you took off like you were being chased by a Stinger Missile - I didn't know that big plane could climb that fast!”

Roger spoke up “You haven't seen anything - It can land on a postage stamp lake too!”

“So what do you need the Super Stallion for?”

“The TurboGoose can't hover or lift 36,000 pounds.”

“There is that - hovering is a nice trick if you can manage it.”

Ron turned to Roger, “So do we have a deal?”

“You bet, let's go to my office and do the paperwork.”

An hour later, Ron was short 1 TurboGoose and plus one medium to heavy lift chopper. Roger drove him back out to the chopper, and they boarded it for the long flight home. By the time they landed in Allakaket, Ron decided that if he flew again in a chopper, it would be too soon.

He would stick with fixed wing. He talked to BA, and found out the 2 TurboGoose aircraft he had ordered were right on schedule, and would be done in a month.

The next day the Super Stallion got to work, and productivity at the mine almost tripled. Sarah slowly healed, and 2 weeks later Doc Miller removed her sutures. After the sutures were out, she slowly started acting like a normal infant, and started crawling. Nancy held her a lot, but Sarah wanted to explore like her big brothers. Jake and Josh somehow understood that Sarah wasn't 100 %, and played gently with her. Even Moose was gentle with her, which amazed Nancy.

Two days later, Ron got a very cryptic call from Steve to report to MacDill for a T&E session by himself, and to bring his P-14.

Once he was at MacDill, they drove him out to the range, and he saw a very strange looking Bradley. General Shepard was waiting for him. "Ron, this is a top-secret prototype. Sorry about all the secrecy, but the fewer people who know about this the better. Barretts got together with the manufacturer of the Bradley, and the result is this. They call it the Bradley X-1 for the lack of a better name, but the Sergeants have already dubbed it "Robo-Tank" We need you to take the next week or so and make sure it shoots as well as the previous prototype, and if it doesn't we need your help figuring out why not. Ron, this is one of our most important projects in the history of the Army. If this weapon works the way it's advertised, it would revolutionize land warfare. We really appreciate your service, and frankly right now you're doing your country more of a service than if you had been admitted to the Air Force. Pilots - we've got dozens of guys that can fly as good as you, and thanks to Congress, they're all grounded. But your unique skill set makes you the ideal T&E Engineer for these projects. The Pentagon is still scratching their heads over that 28mm group at 1,000 yards. We incorporated your ideas into this prototype, and added a few that the Army thought of like a locking suspension to further limit movement when the gun is shooting. We want you to test all the systems independently and together. We need to find out how well the gun shoots with just the suspension locks vs. the outriggers, since the best we can do is a 1.5 minute deployment. The Pentagon still thinks the outriggers are a great idea for static ambushes, but they also wanted the capability to get moving after quickly shooting a target within ½ mile."

General Shepard shook Ron's hand, and told him to report to him when the testing session was complete before he left. Ron said "Yes General" and he turned and left. Steve walked him over to the prototype and introduced him to the testing team. It was an alphabet soup of men with 5 or 6 letters after their names. Degrees didn't impress Ron; he only cared what these guys knew about the prototype and how it worked. After the walk around, an Army Staff Sergeant introduced himself as Sergeant Smithers. Ron stifled a laugh, and the Sergeant explained the new prototype. The turret was totally taken up with the gun and the hardware to fire it accurately. Basically what they did was armor plate the existing Robo-gun. It had the army's latest and greatest armor, since if the gun malfunctioned, they were out of the fight and as good as dead. This first series of tests was to ensure the gun still worked like it did before, then

they'd take it to the tank testing center and destructively test it.

"You're going to blow up the prototype?" yelled Ron.

"Only way to find out what it can take is to progressively hit it with a bigger and bigger weapons system."

"How do you compensate for cumulative damage?"

"We also have tested the armor by itself, so we know its proof against anything smaller than a 25mm Bushmaster round, so all they test it against is another bushmaster, and then various small missiles. We know a TOW or a Hellfire would kill it, because it kills the Abrams, and it's much more heavily armored. What we're really interested in is if this new gun can kill a tank."

"Sarge, I highly doubt it could kill an Abrams, but it might be able to disable it enough by hitting a vulnerable spot to make it combat ineffective. Even if the crew is unhurt, if the gun won't fire or the tank won't move, that's as good as a kill."

"Exactly Ron! If we can use the precision targeting system to pick a shot to a vulnerable spot, and blow a tread off, damage the engine, or even wreck the gun, that's as good as a kill in our book."

Sgt. Smithers opened the hull hatches and showed Ron the inside of the prototype. The interior was Spartan and packed with equipment. He commented about all the monitors.

"Ron, that's also the Army's latest and greatest. We don't need vision blocks or Night Vision goggles to see outside. The gunner has the big monitor in front, and two smaller ones to his sides. The Driver/Commander has 5 monitors. 4 to give him a 360 view around, and one HUD that gives him a "God's Eye" view of the battlefield mounted above the monitor in front. It shows where everything in the battlefield is, with symbology showing IFF codes for friend and foe. We can receive data from other Bradleys, tanks, and anyone else equipped with the Battlefield Awareness System. The datalink is so heavily encrypted that we're just about positive it can't be hacked. Putting IFF gear on every US military vehicle was the smartest move they ever did. It's smart technology, and doesn't broadcast the IFF codes unless interrogated by a transceiver with the correct codes, so the enemy can't locate our vehicles using IFF, since they don't know the codes. This should eliminate Friendly fire, or blue on blue incidents. Land Warrior is supposed to include this IFF technology, so until they upgrade, dismounted infantry are still going to be theoretically vulnerable to friendly fire. But if someone uses common sense, and sees an IFF equipped Bradley supporting them, they should assume the infantry is friendly. Anyway, back to the prototype. We both wear helmets with intercoms. You have total control of the gun, and I have a 30 caliber machine gun mounted on the hull right in front with a smaller T&E mechanism that isn't as accurate as your gun, but the

little gun is for shooting enemy infantry, so a short burst will take care of that problem. Here's a stack of manuals, tomorrow we start testing."

They climbed out of Robo-tank, and Steve drove him back to the VIP quarters. Ron was full of questions, but Steve told him flat-out he didn't know any more about the program than Ron did. Knowledge was purely on a need-to know basis. Ron probably knew more about the program right now than even General Shepard did. That got Ron's attention, and he was quiet for the rest of the trip. Steve told Ron there was a safe in the room, and he handed him the key. He told Ron that when he was asleep, out of the room for even a second, or even in the john, the documents were to be locked up, and he was to be armed from here on out, that was why he told him to bring his P-14. If anyone besides General Shepard, the Project Director or Steve tried to take the documents away from him, he was authorized to use lethal force to protect the documents. Also, from here on out, he was subject to the National Secrets protocol. He was to be armed 7/24, and the US Government would authorize Bear to buy any equipment necessary for his protection.

"Steve, what have you got me into?"

"Ron, you got yourself into this - I'm sure you saw this coming when you were testing Robo-gun?"

"I didn't think I would be a kidnap target!"

"Actually I highly doubt you're at any risk for kidnap. One of the SEALs got wind of what Bear was up to at the Alaska Survival School, and this is just CYA so the ATF can't bust him for all the Military Hardware he has. General Shepard is good friends with Bear, and didn't want to see him doing 20 at Leavenworth, especially since he's got 2 kids now!"

The next day, Ron finally got into Robo-Tank, and was playing with the switches, and noticed the "Target and Track" mode was no longer there. He told the Sarge the test was suspended until further notice, asked Where the Hell was the test program coordinator - and found out that the Pentagon deleted the Target and Track function. Ron yelled "But that was the main difference between Robo-Gun and the Bushmaster it replaced, without the T&T function, the gun is no better than the original Bushmaster." Ron found out the Army General in charge of the program was responsible for removing the T&T function as a "Cost Saving Measure".

"Cost Saving Measure My Ass - I smell a Rat!"

Meanwhile Steve had driven up, and Ron gave him the Reader's Digest version. Steve knew Program Sabotage when he saw it, and called General Shepard, who told them to get their butts into his office.

15 minutes later, they were explaining the situation to the General. When he heard which Army

General was involved he yelled, "That Corrupt SOB is involved - I knew it! There were rumors floating around the Pentagon when I was there that he was a little too tight with the contractor for the Bushmaster Gun. If he torpedoed this project to save their miserable contract, I'll shoot him personally. We need to do some research, and if it's true, I'll call the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs personally with my evidence. He'll fire the SOB in a heartbeat."

"Excuse me General, if I can have access to the internet, and some military documents, I should be able to prove it."

"Ron, you're a Civilian Contractor, but your clearance is high enough that you should have access to the database." He handed Ron a card with a magnetic strip on it, and his photograph. Ron stared at it for a minute. The lettering said he had a DOD Top-Secret clearance.

"General, when did I get this?"

"You had to have a TOP as soon as you were 18 to work on this project, so I put you in for the ID card in case you ever needed it. This ID says you're a civilian contractor on a project so classified that no one not specifically cleared for this project can even ask you about it. If you take the card outside into the conference room, there's a computer there. The card will open the door and also grant you access to the system. The first time you use it, you need to type a password you can remember. It has to be at least 10 characters long, but no more than 20. Now get going - I need results FAST!"

"Yes Sir General!"

Ron walked next door, inserted the card into the door, and it clicked, so he turned the knob. He was all alone in a conference room with a desk and a computer. He turned the computer on, inserted his ID card, and the welcome screen came on asking for his password. He typed it in, and the computer asked to verify it, so he typed it again. The next message said his ID was confirmed and he had access to anything with a Top-Secret clearance or less. He typed the general's name into the search function, and soon he had his entire file. It seemed this general had a much nicer house and car than he should have based on his salary, then he checked his duty stations, and then he looked up the projects he had managed over the last couple of years, and it turned out the same people kept coming up. Ron wrote up his suspicions, printed the relevant pages, and logged off the computer, then carried the folder back to the General. When he read the documents - he could follow the dotted lines as easily as anyone could. His response made Ron think that General Shepard might have been a Navy Chief instead of an Air Force General. He called up the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs, and gave him the lowdown. To say that the 4-star General was angry was like saying Ron was a pretty decent shot. He could tell by the way General Shepard was holding the phone away from his ear that the general was really PO'd. When he finally calmed down, General Shepard told him he would fax the evidence to his personal secure fax machine. 2 minutes later the Chairman was back on the phone. "Gene, I'll take care of this personally! By tomorrow, you'll have a change order

telling the contractor to re-install the Targeting and Tracking software, and that SOB will be looking for a new job!”

“Yes Sir General Sir!”

“Gene this project had better work, or that SOB might have a valid complaint - make sure you go over the system with a fine-tooth comb, and make sure they didn’t mess with anything else!”

“Understood General - I’ll make sure it happens.”

“Ron, go over that system with a fine-tooth comb, and find out if they changed anything else. This SOB might have done more damage than we think - the first thing to check is all the change orders. Anything remotely funky needs to be thoroughly investigated. If he did anything else, I’ll recommend to the Chairman that he be brought up on charges!”

“Yes Sir. I planned on suspending the rest of the testing session until we’re sure that everything was back to the way it was.”

“Thanks Ron, the country owes you a huge debt for your honesty. This weapons system will save soldier’s lives, and if that SOB torpedoed the project just to earn an extra million in kickbacks, he deserves to spend the rest of his life at Leavenworth! Good thing we caught it now, and can fix it. Just make sure he didn’t tamper with anything else.”

“Yes Sir. If I find anything major, I’ll make sure you know about it!”

“Thanks Ron, now back to work!”

Steve saluted and Ron shook the General’s hand, and they went back to the testing area. Ron sat everyone down, and told them they needed to pull all the change orders, and if anyone found one that would degrade the performance of the system, he needed to let Ron know. Ron saw a hummer drive up with an MP/Courier inside. “Ron Williams?”

“Right here!”

“Sign please!”

Ron showed the courier his ID card, and he handed Ron the package, a manila envelope with his name on it from General Shepard. When he opened it, it contained a change order from the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs ordering the Targeting and Tracking software reloaded immediately, and a footnote to disregard any change orders without his signature on them. Ron showed the copy of the order to the software engineer, who had anticipated the General’s order since he didn’t agree with the “Cost Saving” BS to begin with, and quickly downloaded the T&T software into the system. After spending hours reading change orders, they couldn’t find

any more that would degrade the system. They found that by searching for the name of the general on the orders, they could eliminate 2/3 of them immediately, and the other 3rd weren't important. Ron kept all the change orders signed by the SOB separate just in case, including the one ordering the deletion of the T&T software. His signature on the change order would be enough to courts martial him if he tried anything else.

Once he was satisfied that the Robo-tank was back up to speed, Ron and Sgt Smithers climbed aboard, fired up the motor, and Ron ran the self-test. It ran perfectly, and the gun worked as advertised. With that ready, he decided to start the first sequence of the test, and pressed a button activating the range. They would check acquisition and accuracy with just the suspension locked then try it again with the outriggers down and locked. Since the tanks would pop up randomly, move, and drop back down, Ron was using the Target and Track mode where the gun made the decision when to fire, and all Ron had to do was place the crosshairs on the target using the joystick and press the trigger to designate the tank as a target. The gun then tracked the targets, and fired in sequence while Ron sought out new targets. The gun was never more than 3 targets behind Ron, and only missed 1 tank which was over ½ mile away. Ron suspected that ½ mile was the maximum range he could engage targets successfully without the outriggers. He stopped the test, and asked that a single target be placed ½ mile away, and the gun reloaded. He wanted to confirm his suspicions, and as soon as the target was up and the range clear, he placed the crosshairs on the X-ring and squeezed the trigger. Without re-aiming between shots he fired 5 more rounds, then turned the gun off, and asked that the target be pulled and measured. A half mile was only 880 yards, so any difference from a 1-hole group would be due to instability of the platform. When the runner came back with the target, it had 2 bullet holes in it, and they were over a foot apart. Ron showed everyone the target, and explained his theory, and they agreed. To prove his theory, he had another target ran out to 880 yards while he set the outriggers. When the range was clear, he performed the exact same test, and this time, all 5 rounds were in the center of the paper, and his widest spread was 1 foot, and that was mostly a flyer. The rest of the group was within 6 inches of each other. He showed that target to the group, and they drew the same conclusions he did.

Chapter 20 - Robo-Tank

When he had finished the “short range testing” Ron switched target programs so that they got targets out past a mile. This is where it would get interesting, since Ron needed the zoom on the camera to ID targets out past 880 yards. Once the scenario started, he used the wheel to zoom in and out as fast as he could. He’d find targets at the 25-50X magnification setting, then zoom in to 80-100X to target a vulnerable spot on the tank, then back out to engage the next target. The gun barely lagged behind Ron in this mode, because it took longer for him to engage each new target. Still, when they tallied the score he was 30-30 with 10 kills and 20 major disables, and this against foreign Main Battle Tanks. Once they were finished with that scenario, Ron added another test - he wanted to see how far away he could engage and kill a tank, and also he wanted to set a target at 1 mile, 1.5 miles and 2 miles to check the accuracy of the system at extreme range. He left the outriggers out, and switched to sniper mode for the long-range shooting capability of the system in this mode. He fired 5 rounds at each target without re-aiming between each shot, and when he pulled the targets, he noticed something. His first shot went through the X-ring, and the rest of them were within a 6-inch circle at a mile, a 9-inch circle at 1.5 miles, and a 12-inch circle at 2 miles. None of the other testers could detect any pattern to the groups, but Ron knew there was a harmonic at work since he knew the order of the rounds he fired, and requested another set of targets at 1-mile range in a hemisphere from 9 o’clock to 3 o’clock every 45 degrees. Once the targets were set up and the range cleared, he engaged each target one at a time with 5 rounds each. He shut the gun down, and had the runner pull the targets, and mark them 1-4 with the #1 target at his 9 o’clock. When they examined this group of targets, it was obvious that the angle of the turret to the hull changed the shape of the group. It was up to the Army to decide if the variance was acceptable.

Ron wondered if the hull/turret interface was strong enough, and asked if there was anyone there that knew how the turret and the hull were mated. A Mechanical Engineer spoke up, and attempted to explain in polysyllabic words how the two systems interfaced. Ron asked him “Was that English you were speaking?” They all got a good laugh, and the Engineer explained that the weight of the turret held the turret into the hull, and it mated on a huge ring gear. Ron asked him if anyone checked to see if the turret was dynamically and statically balanced. “We’ve never done that before - it was never needed!” Ron explained to the engineer using words of the fewest syllables possible that it was needed now - since the gun was engaging targets up to 2 miles away, and the ballistic computer could only compensate for so much. The engineers were nodding their heads and taking notes like crazy. If they could harmonically and statically balance the turret, they might be able to increase the range of the weapons system past the 2-miles specified as the maximum design range. Ron explained that in the previous tests the gun was fixed to a huge block of concrete, not installed in a turret, and in the sniper mode the gun shot a 1-hole 28mm group at 1,000 yards. Several of the engineers dropped their clipboards when they heard that! One grabbed his slide rule calculator and extrapolated that accuracy out to 2 miles. Theoretically the gun could shoot a 3” group at 2 miles! The groups they were getting were 4 times that value, and they knew it was due to the gun being mounted

in a turret on a tank. They started trying to figure out ways to reduce that number without spending a lot of money. They knew when they got the prototype back to the shop, they had to lift that gun and turret out of the hull and at least statically balance it. Ron told them the outriggers were doing their job, and even a half-mile range with the ability to shoot and move seconds later was pretty good. Over the next week, Ron confirmed that the rest of the system worked perfectly, and if they could solve the balance issue the gun would have a static range of over 2 miles in static Sniper Mode, and over half a mile in shoot and scoot, and about a mile with the outriggers down. The rate of accurate aimed fire impressed the heck out of the engineers. They wrote glowing reports, and General Shepard got a copy of each.

Before he left, Ron walked into the General's office. General Shepard stood and shook Ron's hand. Then he handed him a certificate. It was an official commendation from the Joint Chiefs for a job well done. General Shepard handed him a check for \$100,000.00 from the prime contractor for the T&E session. The note attached to the check indicated that they hoped his recommendations would increase the range of the gun to almost 3 miles. Ron was glad for the money, but what General Shepard told him next floored him.

"Ron, I've been friends with Bear since he saved my butt in Vietnam when I got shot down in Indian Country, and he led the team that got me out. I heard what he was up to with his weapons procurement, and this letter makes it all legal. Give him my regards, and have him e-mail me a list of everything he needs, and if it's available, I'll get it to him. If it's surplus or obsolete, I can sell it to him for scrap prices, or if it's still current, he'll have to pay replacement costs. This letter authorizes Bear to protect you, your operation, and anyone involved by any means necessary, including lethal force using military weaponry. Son, you've just been declared a Strategic Military Asset. You're not in the military, but we feel your abilities are vital to the defense of the United States. Here's a Federal CCW for you, and one for your wife. You can now carry concealed anywhere in the USA including commercial aircraft even when you aren't the pilot in command. Bear and Hunter already have a Federal CCW. Please don't abuse the privilege. Ron, the United States Military owes you a huge debt of gratitude. If we can get Robo-tank into production quickly, anyone that messes with the US Army or Marines will be in a world of hurt."

"General, you said Marines - I can assume you're thinking of installing this gun in the LAV instead of their Bushmaster?"

"Exactly - this gun is 10 times better than the original Bushmaster, and it also simplifies the crew compartment, since the gunner is autonomous, and the commander could either be the gunner or the driver. It frees up a whole bunch of space too!"

Ron couldn't wait to tell Bear - he owed him for that chopper ride! Ron was driven directly from the General's office to the VIP quarters to pack, and then to the VIP terminal. He got to use his Federal CCW when the Air Police stopped him when he pinged the metal detector. He showed the AP officer his brand-new Federal CCW, and the officer waved him through. Ron

could get used to this - he hated flying commercial since they practically strip searched you. He boarded the aircraft and they were wheels-up 5 minutes later. Ron was glad the General kept the manuals for Robo-Tank, he didn't want to be responsible for them. Later that afternoon, they landed at Elmendorf, and he walked off the plane, and onto the TurboGoose. Once he got clearance he took off and flew home. Nancy hugged the stuffing out of him when he got home, and he was glad he slept on the plane because judging by the kiss she gave him, he wasn't going to get too much sleep tonight!

The next day, he showed up unannounced at Alaska Survival Inc. Bear was busy feeding his kids, so Ron waited, then he handed Bear the letter General Shepard gave him. He said "General Shepard gives his regards." Bear's eyes bugged out when the enormity of the letter settled. "Bear, General Shepard knew what you were up to, and decided to make it legal so you won't spend the next 20 years at Leavenworth, especially now that you have 2 kids."

"Ron this letter goes way beyond that - I'm authorized to use lethal force to defend you, the company and anyone associated with it against any threat, and to even use military weaponry. I guess he didn't mean nukes?"

"Probably not, but I know you could come up with some very creative defenses. The General said for you to e-mail him a list of anything you can use, and if it's surplus or obsolete, he would charge you scrap prices for it, and if it's current inventory, he'd charge you replacement cost." Ron could tell the wheels were spinning in Bear's mind. He stood up to go, and Bear gave him a Bear hug, and he walked back to the TurboGoose and flew home.

Bear and Hunter sat down and made a list of stuff they'd want to have, they didn't hope to get more than half of it:

- M -134 7.62mm Gatling Gun (12)
- 7.62mm linked ammo for M -134 (12M)
- M163 Vulcan VADS (4)
- 20mm ammo for M163 (4M)
- FIM-92A Stinger (48)
- M -72 LAW (200)
- M -18 Claymore (100)
- M -14 APM (100)
- M -16 APM (100)
- M -4/M -203 w/ SOPMOD kit (100)
- M -406 HE 40mm Grenade (1200)
- M -433 HEDP 40mm Grenade (1200)
- M583A140mm WS Para Illum (240)
- M -662 Red Star Cluster (240)
- M -680 White Smoke Canopy (120)
- M -918 Target Practice (1200)

M -1029 40mm Crowd Control (1200)
AN/PVS-4 Night Vision Sight (10)
M224 60mm Lightweight Mortar (3)
M720 60mm HE Mortar Cartridge (300)
M722 60mm Smoke Cartridge (90)
M -61 Frag Grenade (120)
M -67 Frag “Baseball” Grenade (120)
M -84 Stun Grenade “Flash Bang” (120)
M -69 Practice Grenade (120)
TLAM-N (3)

Hunter was chuckling as he read the list “Bear - you really think you can get all that?”

“Hope so! Otherwise there’s no point in the list.”

“How about that last item - A Nuclear Cruise Missile?”

“It’s an Inside Joke between me and the General - I just included it to make sure he was paying attention!”

“Ok, great - let’s send it, I can’t wait to read the General’s reaction!”

They e-mailed the list to General Shepard’s private e-mail address. He read the list, got to the last item, and almost fell out of his chair laughing.

He replied:

Approved, all except the last Item - It’s not time to “Shoot the Bastards” yet!

Love and Kisses,
General Shepard

Hunter didn’t get the reference to the General’s reply so he asked Bear

“Bear WTF - It’s Not time to shoot the Bastards yet?”

“Look it up Pea-brain - It’s a quote by Claire Wolfe - “America’s at that Awkward Stage, Too late to change from within, and too soon to Shoot the Bastards!” It’s one of my favorite quotes, especially since I keep asking the General if it’s time yet - The Nuclear Cruise Missile would have been my preferred weapon for that mission.”

“Sierra Hotel Bear - let me know when it’s time!”

General Shepard assigned the list to an aide, who located the merchandise at various armories, and then tried to find them as close to Alaska as possible. He was stunned when he located everything at Elmendorf - he never heard of the M -163 VADS. He looked it up, and realized it would work great for shooting down helicopters. Since there was nowhere a fixed wing that wasn't an amphibian could land, their primary weapon they needed to defend against was heliborne or air-assault troops; and unless they were coming in HALO, the M -163 would make mincemeat of them. He did some research on his own, and located 2 obsolete but very effective Military Search Radars with a 100 mile range. He added them to the list after getting the General's approval. He handed the list back to the General for his approval, and he forwarded a requisition to Elmendorf under his signature, and coded it to a SF Special Project, and authorized Chief Simmons and Ron Williams to pick it up and deliver it. The CO knew about Ron Williams, and had heard stories about Bear and the General, so he approved the Requisition. The Supply Sergeant was rolling in the isles, and told his personnel to remove the entire list from inventory, and notify him when it was all ready to ship. 2 days later, they had everything inventoried, and put on pallets. He called his CO, who called General Shepard, who e-mailed a copy of the requisition to Bear and told him the entire order was at Elmendorf, and it was No Charge - he had charged it to a Special Forces Project, so make sure to bring his military ID. Bear called Ron, and Ron asked him how the heck they were going to get all that loot home. Bear suggested taking the CH-47, the S-80, and a TurboGoose. Since it was still their slow season, Ron made the arrangements for them to fly to Elmendorf tomorrow. Bear replied to General Shepard telling him they would pick it up tomorrow.

The next morning the Choppers took off first because they were 50 knots slower than the TurboGoose. Ron took off half an hour after them, and they arrived within minutes of each other at Elmendorf. Once they landed, Bear climbed out of the TurboGoose - he preferred fixed wing too, especially at his age, wearing his BDU's. He presented his Military ID to the Supply Sergeant, who approved the shipment with a wink and a nod - he knew where he was going to retire! Ron looked at the mountain of gear, and was glad the supply people had fork lifts. The ammo and the lighter stuff went in the TurboGoose. Ron was glad he had his life insurance paid up when he got a look at what was stenciled on some of those boxes. They decided it would be quicker to sling-load the 4 Vulcan M163 VADS and make 2 trips. Ron flew very carefully to Bear's survival school - he didn't want to store any of this stuff in Allakaket unless he had to. 2 trips later everything was at Bear's survival school, and the Chopper pilots felt they were back in the military, especially when they saw the GE Mini Guns, and realized the Super Stallion could be quickly retrofitted as a gunship. The SA-80 pilot wondered if Bear was planning on installing a chin turret for the GE Minigun! Bear spent the next couple of weeks getting the gear ready to Repel Boarders. 2 of the M163's were flown to unused hangars at Allakaket, one of the military radars was flown there as well, set up, and installed. Bear sent an e-mail to Don at the FAA office indicating the radar was for defensive purposes, and mentioned General Shepard, and nothing more was ever heard about it. Bear installed another unit at his location, and figured that between the 2 of them, they would have 3-4 hours warning of an air attack. By comparing the FAA radar and the military radar, they could identify Friend of Foe because anyone up to no good would turn off their transponder, making them invisible to the

FAA radar at Allakaket, but they would be visible on the military radar. Bear was really happy when he found out the M163s were the newest variant with the millimeter-wave targeting radar and an optical backup. It would give the system the same accuracy as the CWIS and it was mobile. The big Military search radars could give the general bearing, and once the targeting radar locked it was “Hasta La Vista Baby!” Bear decided that these Civilians needed some training, so every week, he took volunteers up to the Survival School, swore them to secrecy, ran them through a familiarization course, then trained them on either the Springfield M-1a National Match on the 600-yard line or else the M -16/M -203 combo on the 300-yard line. Everyone in the Militia realized that all kinds of trouble would result if word got out that they had Military weapons, so they kept their mouths shut.

General Wilcox wasn't the brightest of crooks, and he wanted revenge on Ron Williams in the worst way when he found out that he was the whistle-blower that got him fired. He hired a team of mercenaries to kidnap and kill Ron. He demanded to fly in the chopper to make sure the job was done right. They got to a RCAF base and stole a Huey and flew to Allakaket. The Allakaket Radar operator noticed a return that wasn't on his FAA scope coming in from Canada, and called Don to see if any helicopters had filed a flight plan from Canada to the Alaskan interior. He said they didn't, he called Bear, and Bear called Elmendorf. They didn't have anything on the chopper either, and by the time they scrambled a pair of F-16's the chopper would be over Allakaket. That sealed it as far as Bear was concerned. He got on the phone, alerted the Allakaket Militia that they would be under air attack in 15 minutes. They drove over to the hangar where the M -163 VADS was parked, and he checked it over, started the motor, and left the doors open. They turned on an FRS radio that they could talk to the tower with, and the tower gave them range and bearing. When it was 5 minutes out, the operator called the helicopter. “Unidentified Aircraft, please ID and turn on your transponder, you're entering a congested area.” He repeated the message on GUARD, then radioed the team on the FRS “Negative contact - still on original course and heading.”

General Wilcox knew that they probably didn't have any defensive weapons worth a darn, and probably got a skin-paint off their FAA radar. By the time they got some help, Ron would be dead and they would be out of there.

Bear hadn't been sitting on his hands either. He called Ron, and told him to get in the shelter ASAP. Ron bundled Nancy and the kids into the basement shelter, and Moose made it in right before he closed and dogged the bolts. It would take a bunch of C-4 to get to him now. Ron turned on the emergency lights, and switched on the emergency radio to listen for the “All Clear” Code.

An observer on the ground picked up the black chopper with his Night Vision telescopic sight and saw that the occupants were heavily armed. He spoke into his FRS radio, “Vulcan, Target is HOSTILE and heavily armed - engage when ready.”

That was all the encouragement the driver needed, and accelerated out of the hangar. The

Chopper was still 50 feet in the air when the M -163 VADS Targeting radar locked on it, and the gunner pressed the trigger. A 2-second burst of 20mm HE, AP and tracer rounds destroyed the chopper in mid-air. 5 seconds later the radar operator said, "Sky is clear - no other targets."

Bear swore because the cat was now out of the bag. He called General Shepard, who got things rolling. The military told the FAA to stay out, since this wasn't an accident, and it was probably a terrorist attack, so they backed off. Subsequent investigation located ID numbers on the Huey and traced it back to a nearby RCAF base in Canada. The RCAF quietly checked, and they were missing a chopper. The military forensic experts found some interesting debris, including the remains of several H&K MP-5SDs, several M -16/M -203 receivers, and a couple of .30 caliber "Assault Rifles". They found a cluster of gold stars in the wreckage, so they tested all the DNA in the crash site near the stars, and got an exact match on one ex-general Wilcox. The Joint Chiefs were notified, and the Chairman talked to General Shepard, and they came to the obvious conclusion that Ex-General Wilcox was on some sort of vendetta, and had probably been attempting to kidnap or kill Ron Williams when the M -163 gun shot him out of the sky. The Joint Chiefs invoked a National Security cover over the entire event. Bear got a major Bravo Zulu from General Shepard, and an offer to get them anything else they needed. Ron was only told that someone was attempting to attack Allakaket in a chopper, and the Vulcan blew them out of the sky.

Chapter 21 - Reload and Rearm

The attack on Allakaket got Bear's attention, and he sent an e-mail to General Shepard asking for help in setting up a serious defensive system for Allakaket. The problem was it couldn't be overt like they were defending a base so the civilians wouldn't freak out.

General Shepard forwarded the e-mail to all the commands at MacDill asking for suggestions/advice for a totally covert defensive system that could stop another attack cold.

Every command made suggestions, but Bear vetoed most of them for being either too high-profile or too dangerous to the civilians. Active minefields could kill an unwary hunter, and all the area needed was an accidental death of a visiting hunter to shut their operation down,

One idea he loved was the RPV surveillance system, except it would be a major pain to implement with so many aircraft flying around. He did some checking and found the Predator III did its best work above 5,000 feet AGL, and most of the air traffic around Allakaket was below 2,000 feet, so the only problems would be landing and take-off clearances. He'd need to hire a crew to service and fly the drones, and the drones only worked to spot ground targets. What he really needed was something that could detect and intercept air targets including high-speed jets.

He e-mailed General Shepard his idea, and got a very cryptic message back. The gist of it was they needed to talk face-to-face. Bear replied they could meet at Elmendorf. General Shepard remembered that Ron had a top-secret clearance, and contacted someone about adding Chief "Bear" Simmons and Ron Williams to a code-word list for a black project as consultants for a field-trial. He received a one-word reply "Approved". General Shepard checked and his VC-20 was fueled and ready to fly. He e-mailed Bear that he was flying to Elmendorf and wanted him and Ron Williams to meet him. They were to follow the Follow-Me truck to an undisclosed location on base. He'd be waiting for them.

Bear read the E-mail, called Ron and told him he needed to pick him up at the Survival School in an hour, and he should pack an overnight bag just in case. Ron called the maintenance hangar, asked them to prep his plane for flight. He needed to be wheels-up in 20 minutes. Ron grabbed an overnight bag, kissed Nancy, hugged the kids, petted Moose and was out the door and at the airfield in 15 minutes. The turbines were idling when he got there, so he climbed into the cockpit, programmed the navigation computer for the Survival School, called the tower, and received immediate clearance while taxiing out to the lake. As soon as he was at the end of the lake, he pushed the throttles to take-off, and flew an optimum cruise speed profile to the school. An hour later he was on the ground, and Bear was wearing his BDU's and carrying a black duffle. Ron told him to come forward to the cockpit and ride right seat so they could talk - he wanted to know WTF was so important. Once Bear was seated and had his headset on, Bear explained that General Shepard wanted to meet the two of them in Elmendorf in about 2 hours.

Ron reprogrammed the nav computer for Elmendorf and took off. 2 hours later they were on the ground at Elmendorf, and Bear told him to follow the Follow-Me truck when a Hummer with flashing yellow “Follow-me” lights pulled in front of their nose. It lead them to a part of the base that Ron had never been to before. When they deplaned, they saw a building in front of them surrounded by Air Force police with M-16’s in a 100-foot perimeter. General Shepard got out of the Hummer with the “follow-me” lights, and motioned for Bear and Ron to follow him. They all had to present ID’s, good thing Ron kept his TS ID card in his wallet. Once they were inside, General Shepard locked the door, and told them to take seats.

“Ron, Bear, sorry about all the cloak and dagger stuff, but the answer to Bear’s request involved a black project. Ron, that helicopter that the Vulcan shot down was flying Ex-General Wilcox and a team of mercs who were after your hide. This has now gone from an exercise to a real security issue. Bear has taken care of everything necessary to protect you, except the anti-air defense issue is tough to do covertly. What I’m about to tell you can’t leave this room, but the Military is working on a next-generation autonomous air interceptor, and I feel this would be an ideal field test. You’re in an isolated and relatively secure area, you have radar backup from Elmendorf, and I’m going to upgrade your radar to a more modern radar set that can detect slow-moving low-flying aircraft that would normally be lost in the ground clutter.”

General Shepard handed each of them a thin file with a code-word designator. Bear gulped, it had been years since he had seen Code Word stuff. He opened the folder, and was amazed at what the military had been up to. This was literally Buck Rodgers stuff. They had miniaturized a flying wing down to the size of an ROV, yet according to the paperwork, it was totally autonomous and extremely stealthy. Reading down further, he commented “Sierra Hotel General - I was hoping they would do something like this!”

Ron read further down - his reaction was “Holy Cow - it’s a flying missile!”

What the Air Force had come up with was a stealthy flying wing interceptor. Instead of pilots flying CAP over a base or other fixed asset, the Terminator, as they were calling it, could loiter for 18 hours at high altitude on a high-endurance turbofan above 20,000 feet, and up to a classified altitude until a separate ground-based or air-based search radar detected an incoming Bogie, at which point the Terminator could be activated by radio command to target the Bandit once it was identified as a hostile. It carried a single SRB in the tail that could accelerate the Terminator from it’s loiter speed to right around Mach 2 in seconds. It was designed to attack from above, dive into the threat and kamikaze itself into the threat, detonating a shaped charge and a payload of steel ball bearings into the target at close range for a guaranteed kill. Since the Terminator only had a short-range radar and an all-aspect IR seeker, the Bandit had no indication that it was under attack until it was too late, since it was basically invisible. It was coated with RAM to prevent radar reflections, and the skin had an adaptive coating that would change colors to match it’s surroundings. Each copy cost about 10 times the cost of the latest air-to-air missile, but the Pentagon number-crunchers thought it was the cat’s pajamas, since it cost millions of dollars to train each fighter pilot, and another couple of hundred million per

plane, plus the cost of the missiles. The prime contractor was working on a long-range attack version of the Terminator that could be controlled by an E-3 Sentry, but this system would be perfect for defending Allakaket. It could orbit out of the way above 20,000 feet, and take out any airborne Bandit before it became a threat.

“What if it attacks the wrong target, or goes goofy and heads toward Allakaket.”

“Ron, read page 3, it had a built-in self-destruct set to detonate at 500 feet AGL in case it goes goofy, and the operator has a manual override to self-destruct any Terminator that deviates from it’s assigned loiter altitude without a command. It’s got another backup to keep the bad guys from killing us with our own missiles. The datalink is heavily encrypted, and the codes are set every time it takes off. If it gets an attack order that doesn’t have the right code sequence, it allows 3 attempts then self-destructs.”

Bear said “Excuse me General, but you can’t base these Terminators out of Allakaket!”

“I never intended to Bear. I was going to base them near your Survival School. I was going to lease a couple of acres from you, build hangars, and a short runway to land the Terminator, since it uses the same rocket-boosted take-off system as the Predator, and housing for the operators and mechanics. Since you already have code-word clearance on several projects, I planned on making you a project manager for this long-term field trial. All the personnel will be Air Force with code-word clearance for this project. I’m also assigning 2 Avenger systems to the area: 1 to protect the testing site, and the other to protect Allakaket itself. It’s a perfect compliment to Terminator, since it can engage the low and slow targets, and can take slew to cue data directly from the radar system. You can keep all the Stingers in case TSHTF, and the Chinese invade, you might need to engage more targets than the Avenger crew can handle.”

“General, I thought that’s what the M -163 VADS was for?”

“Keep the Vulcan - it also works great on ground targets. By the way, I’m adding a whole truckload of ammo for the Vulcan to that order. I wish we had a C-130 that was an Amphibian to deliver all this stuff, it would sure make things much easier.”

“General, if you could detail a couple of CH-47’s to deliver them; they could deliver the stuff in 1 trip.”

“Good idea Ron - since it’s an official Military Project now, I can do that - can you give me a lift back and forth to Allakaket, I want to talk to your pilots.”

“Sure General - when did you want to leave?”

“How about now - we can finish this briefing in the air.”

“General - I don’t have a jump seat for the cockpit.”

“That’s OK, I’ll sit in one of the passenger seats for landing and take-off, and we can talk in the air if you leave the cabin door open, heck, I’ll sit on the floor if I have to.”

“General, if we’re going to talk in the air, we’ll need another headset for you.”

General Shepard decided he needed to remedy that situation, called the Maintenance Chief and told him he needed a headset multiplexer and a removable jump seat installed in an aircraft ASAP! 5 minutes later the maintenance chief and an mechanic showed up in another Hummer. The general pointed out the aircraft, and 30 minutes later, the multiplexer and the removable jump seat were installed. The Maintenance Chief saluted the General, who returned the salute and thanked the Maintenance chief for a job well done, and they climbed aboard the TurboGoose for the flight home. Ron got on his Sat phone, and called BA, and told him they needed to have an “All Pilots” meeting in Allakaket in 2 hours. Ron was thankful they were in their down phase, so only 2 pilots where not going to be able to attend since they were in the air from Fairbanks to Nome with paying passengers. When they landed 2 hours later, the pilots had to fight their urge to salute since most of them were ex-Air Force Pilots. General Shepard did shake hands, and finally the group sat down.

“Gentlemen, what I’m about to tell you may not leave this room. You are to ignore any small flying objects that are safely above your flight level. The Air Force is going to conduct field testing for a new ROV. That is all you need to know for now, except for the promise that if anyone talks about this they will spend the rest of their lives breaking big rocks into little rocks at Leavenworth. Is that understood?”

The assembled pilots said “Yes Sir, General!”

“That is all, Dismissed.”

After shaking hands, General Shepard told Ron he needed to get back to Elmendorf so he could get back to MacDill. Not one to keep a General waiting, they hurried out to the TurboGoose, which had been refueled and prepped for take-off. Evidently his Chief Mechanic was ex-military as well, and knew enough to have the TG prepped and ready to go. They were airborne 5 minutes later, and they landed at Elmendorf 2 hours later. Ron shook the General’s hand, but Bear wound up giving the General a bear hug. “Still living up to your Team name I see Bear?”

“Yes Sir, General Sir. Have a good flight!”

General Shepard marched from the TG to the VC-20 parked next to it. Ron let the General’s plane taxi away first, then they unbolted the jump seat and stowed it - it made the cockpit even more crowded than it was before. Ron flew Bear back home, then landed at Allakaket.

When General Shepard got back to MacDill, he issued orders transferring 2 Avenger batteries to Allakaket, and requisitioned the materials that he had told Bear about. He modified his orders to include the request that one of the batteries should have personnel capable of acting as aircraft mechanics as a cover. He contacted his contact in the Terminator program, and suggested they set up a field test program at Alaskan Survival Inc. and that Chief Simmons USN (ret.) would act as the Project Supervisor in the field.

General Shepard's contact ran Chief Simmons through his database, and when it came back that Chief Simmons was actually Master Chief Simmons, and a retired SEAL with enough medals in his file to sink a battleship, he felt better. He told his US Military test team that they were TAD to Elmendorf for a long-term field test program at Alaskan Survival Inc. They quickly packed up their test gear, and all the operational gear for the 6 prototypes, loaded it aboard a C-141 and flew to Elmendorf. Bear received an E-mail that the Terminator was TAD to Elmendorf with an ETA of tomorrow morning. He thought it was really nice to have low friends in high places. Only a 3-star general could get people moving that quickly. The fact that he was the JSOC helped too. 2 weeks later the Avenger batteries were relocated from somewhere in the Midwest in storage, and someone had located 6 soldiers who were qualified on the Avenger, and were also aircraft mechanics. They quickly found themselves "volunteered" for an assignment in Alaska. They met up with their Avenger batteries at Elmendorf, and they had one last surprise. They weren't to be stationed at Elmendorf, it was just the closest military base. They rode the same CH-47s that were transporting their Avengers as sling loads to Allakaket and Alaskan Survival. The ones at Allakaket were co-located with the Vulcan gun, and didn't have much to do. The ones who landed at Alaskan Survival soon found themselves pressed into work clearing the site for the Terminators. Since they needed to heat their quarters, not only did they cut the trees down, they had to saw them to length and split the wood. Chief Simmons showed up, and amazed them with his strength by splitting logs with one swing of his sledge. When they finished, Chief Simmons got the entire team together for a briefing. The Avenger crews were told that they were there in support of a code-word test program, and one word of what they saw to anyone outside of that room would result in a lifetime breaking rocks.

The Avenger crews were briefed by the Vulcan crew in Allakaket, and realized that this was a No-Shit defensive detail, and took their duties very seriously. The Avenger had to be 100% mission capable as much as possible. The onus would be on the maintenance personnel, but they would expect help from the operating crews as well. They rotated through the aircraft maintenance shops frequently enough to be believable. They were glad for the rotation, because several of them learned a lot while they were there about aircraft maintenance, enough that they would later add "aircraft mechanic" to their list of qualifications.

General Shepard felt like he had closed the barn door after the horses got out, but he knew that it would take a small army to take Allakaket now. The CO at Elmendorf learned about the new powerful air search radars at Allakaket and Alaskan Survival. Instead of complaining, he decided to take advantage of the situation, and established data links between the three sites to share data. Connecting the 3 sites tripled the square area under surveillance and increased the

warning time for attacks in that area. Elmendorf had links to the Cobra Dane radar sites as well, so between all those sites, it would take a miracle for an attacker to get anywhere near Allakaket and attack by air again.

Ron went home that day and saw that Sarah was up and crawling around with her brothers. Nancy was very happy since Sarah was again a normal healthy little girl. Sarah was starting to gain weight like she was supposed to, and had grown almost 3 inches in 6 months. In another couple of months, Sarah would celebrate her second birthday, Jake was 4 going on 5, and Josh was 3 going on 4. Jake ran his mom ragged, but Moose still was a capable play buddy and baby sitter. Since the scare with the helicopter Ron, Nancy, BA and Sally all wore their ParaOrd P-14's full-time. They weren't really comfortable being armed all the time, but got used to it. Nancy and Sally especially got serious about their guns and shooting skills, since they were all that stood between danger and their kids. Ron had given the 3 of them the Reader's Digest version of what General Shepard told him. The only person he told most of the story to was BA, who said they really needed to build an indoor shooting range. Since the two of them were rolling in money, they were able to buy another steel building and install a 100-yard range with 10 lanes and automatic target retrievers. It could be configured for day or night shooting by switching from white to dim red lights. Practice ammo was provided for free to anyone who wanted to use it, and some guns were even available for rent. Ron wrote all the expenses off as employee benefits for Allakaket Airlines, since almost everyone in Allakaket was now an employee of the company in some capacity or another.

Both Nancy and Sally soon became expert shots with their .45's and their AR-15's. Ron remembered something about a mother bear and her cubs, and that accurately described Nancy and Sally's mentality. Even Anne got into the shooting practice again, since she could see again like she used to. Nancy and Anne were neck and neck for top female pistol shooter, but Anne made her daughter-in law look like a blind man with rifles. She routinely shot x-ring groups at 100 yards with open sights on the AR-15. She still thought it was a Poodle Shooter, but realized that a MZB didn't care if he was shot in the 10-ring with a .223 or a .308 unless he was wearing armor since he was dead either way. She liked the light recoil and the high rate of fire of the AR-15 compared to her Browning A-bolt. Later that year, Nancy and Anne went to Alaska Survival Inc. to take advantage of their 600-yard range. Anne decided to have mercy on Nancy, and taught her how to shoot really long distance. By the end of the day, Nancy was doing pretty good on the 600 yard target, and was shooting x-ring on the 300 and 100 yard targets prone with the bipod. Anne thought the bipod was cheating, but she was starting to get shaky in her old age, and the bipod helped.

Bear heard that the civilians were getting restless, and decided to add training in hand to hand combat at the community center once a week. The building they purchased for the shooting range wound up being almost twice as big as they needed for a 100-yard range, since the distributor didn't have any buildings that were 75x300 feet. The closest size he had was 80x500 feet, so they used the rest of the space as a community center and as a nursery for the women who wanted to go shooting. They bought thin wrestling mats for the kids, and they also

worked well for hand to hand training, especially the throws and tosses included in Aikido and Judo. Bear didn't teach them SCARS, but a system that was almost as good, but un-classified. The women in the class acted like momma bears, and some of them scared Bear when he wore his Aggressor padded suit. They were vicious fighters, and several times he took a direct hit to his groin. He was really glad he was wearing a cup when that happened. These women fought dirty! When he taught knife fighting, he was glad they were using rubber knives when he saw some of them in action. He actually felt sorry for any MZB who might make the mistake of attacking any of these women. When they completed his class, there was a run on Bowie knives and Kydex sheaths at the sporting goods store in Anchorage. Nancy decided she'd rather shoot someone, since it was less messy, yet she still carried a Spyderco Native in her blouse pocket with the false edge sharpened, and a Civilian in her pants pocket. She said they were just in case she shot all 43 rounds of Cor-bon JHP ammo she had on her!

Chapter 22 - 2/3 of a Basketball team

Ron and Nancy spent some “quality time” together after the scare, and just as Ron predicted, Nancy was pregnant with Kid #4, they were now 2/3 the way to fielding their own basketball team. Ron decided that now would be a good time to put in the Room Addition. It was way more than just a room addition, but he thought it was funny. They built a 2-story addition to the East wall of the house, changing the design from a classic A-frame to an A-frame with a huge 30-foot wide 20 foot deep and 30 foot high addition with a full basement that was attached to the other basement. The addition gave him another 1800 cubic feet, which gave him another 3 10x20 bedrooms, and storage above and below the bedrooms. The contractor that built the other 2 homes did the room addition as well, and over the summer it was totally in place. The contractor had fun digging the extra basement space, cutting a door in the existing basement wall then re-grading and compacting the site. He hoped Ron wouldn’t need another room addition, because the other side of the house was taken up with the huge garage and outbuildings.

Bear and General Shepard decided to put the Predators in a hangar at Alaskan Survival Inc. instead of flying them, since their airborne defense systems could take out any plane or helicopter that got within 100 miles of Allakaket. The only way someone was going to get near Allakaket was to HAHO out of a commercial jet, since the commercial track was just to the south, but barely within HAHO range of Allakaket. Only US Special Forces practiced HAHO and HALO techniques, so it wasn’t much of a threat. Conventional armies used static line drops, or what the SEALs called “dope on a rope” which meant that everyone hopefully landed in the same area, but meant the drop craft had to overfly the drop zone at a fairly low altitude well within range of the AVENGER system. That meant a cargo craft full of paratroopers became a coffin full of crispy critters.

Sam and Ralph spent as much time together as possible in the next couple of years; when he wasn’t seeing Sam, Ralph was using the Reverend’s Cajun language tapes to re-learn Cajun. Doc Richards definitely approved of Ralph. He was a gentleman in every meaning of the word, and Sam was a lady. He had a surprise for the two of them; the biggest gala of the year was coming up, the annual Southern Plantation Ball at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill. It was the annual fundraiser for the Alumni Association, and tickets were always a premium. As a major contributor, Doc got 4 tickets and was going to give Ralph and Sam 2 of them, so the 4 of them would take the limousine and arrive in style. Ralph’s grey suit would fit in perfectly, since no one wore tuxedos at the ball; they wore Confederate Army uniforms minus the saber, or grey suits. The women always went for the “Southern Belle” look except for the Matrons who wore more conservative, but definitely pre-Civil war era style dresses. Sam was now well into her second year of Internship and was given more duties and responsibilities as she learned the techniques of Emergency Surgery. Ralph and Sam spent a lot of time talking shop, since their specialties had so much in common. Over the last year, they were seen together often enough that everyone in the ER knew they were dating, but they behaved themselves. They

were falling in love with each other, but they had some decisions to make. Sam wasn't about to give up practicing Emergency Surgery to get married, so they had to decide what were they going to do if they got married. They had that discussion several times, and finally decided that they would move for Ralph's career, but only if that move would also allow Sam to work at the same hospital as an Emergency Surgeon. Sam sat down and talked to Doc. He told her that both their specialties were in high demand nationwide, and any major city they chose to live in would be more than happy to hire both of them. Sam said they were considering Atlanta or some other big Southern city, since he was from Louisiana, and she was born in Tennessee, and lived there as an infant, but didn't remember much of it. Still in her heart she was a Southern girl.

BA and Ron had become so close that they could finish each other's sentences, and BA took the time to teach Ron about the ins and outs of Big business since he wasn't flying much anymore. He said the hardest thing to do was to stick to his Christian Principles and still make a profit. They had done great so far, but what if there was an extended economic downturn and the airline was in danger of bankruptcy and he was forced to cut costs?

Ron thought about that, and came up with an answer, it wasn't the best answer, but it beat laying off thousands of workers who were depending on him for an income.

"BA if the Air Transport industry went in the tank for over a year, I'd diversify into other areas like light manufacturing. All we would need to do is add additional turbogenerators to our geothermal steam power plant. I was always wondering why you bought a building 3 times the size we needed, now I understand it was so we could add 3 more 10MW turbogenerators if we needed to. Too bad it's prohibitively expensive to run high tension lines, or we could export power to other parts of Alaska."

"If fuel costs go much higher, we'll have to extend power lines to Alaskan Survival Inc. The upside of that would be a huge reduction in operating costs having to fly in fuel and pay for millions of gallons of diesel each year."

"BA, did you run the numbers on installing a high-tension line between here and there?"

Bill opened a spreadsheet on his computer and said, "Here's my best estimate of the costs and benefits. To run a 100KV line from here to Alaska Survival and the gold mine will cost approximately 2 million dollars, including installing 3 10MW turbogenerators, the piping, etc. Luckily we own the Chinook and the Super Stallion, both of which can fly in high-tension towers that we would assemble here. It would mean plotting a route, clearing the sites for the towers, buying the cable, and all the labor to assemble the towers and install them. The good news is according to this spreadsheet we reach break-even in 10 years, and these towers are good for 100 years with annual maintenance."

"How much does Allakaket Airlines have in the bank?"

“Last year was a really good year profit-wise, and we’re sitting on nearly \$15 Million.”

“Ok BA, I’m going to authorize this project right now, with a budget not to exceed \$5 Million. Hire anyone in town who wants to work on this project, and any required sub-contractors, we’ll act as our own General Contractor.”

“Way ahead of you Ron, here’s a company that specializes in High Tension Tower installation, they do all the surveying, clearing and installing. They’re our best bet, since they normally lease the helicopters on a per-project basis, which is expensive. Providing our own helicopters, fuel, and crews will reduce their price by at least 50%. Everyone in town that wants to already works for the airline, so this would be our best bet.”

“Ok BA, go ahead and get it started, I’ve got to give Bear the good news.”

Ron walked into his office and called Bear, “Bear, I’ve got good news; within a year you won’t have to fly in diesel fuel!”

“What - we’re shutting down the Mine? That’s not good news!”

“Bear, relax - We’re going to install a High Tension line between Allakaket and the mine. BA and I crunched the numbers, and we’re sitting on \$15 Million in the bank, and according to BA, it will only cost \$2 million or so to install 3 new 10MW turbogenerators in our building, install the transformers and the high-tension towers between here and there. The best news is we break-even in 10 years or less, and after that, the power is basically free except for the maintenance on the system!”

“Ron, that’s great except for 1 slight problem, that military project near here.”

“We’ll just have to shut them down while the construction company is working in the vicinity, I’m sure the contractors would like some time off. With all those choppers in the air, I really don’t want those things in the air anyway. The Vulcans and Avengers can take care of any threats when they get in range anyway.”

“Ok Ron, I’ll take care of that on my end.”

Bear sent an e-mail to General Shepard advising him of the construction project, and suggesting that they temporarily shut the project down while the construction project was on-going, since there will be helicopters in the air all the time, and the Avengers or Vulcans could take care of any immediate local threats. When they were finished installing the high-tension lines, they would welcome them back. General Shepard agreed, since the contractors were supposed to be on a TAD, and it had been 6 months. If they sent them home for 6 months to a year, they would improve the morale of the troops and contractors. He sent an e-mail to his contact on the Terminator project, advising them of the pending construction project, and the suspension of the

Testing session for 6 months to a year. His contact agreed that a 6-month shut-down was exactly what the doctor ordered, since the contractors were grumbling about being stuck out in the middle of nowhere with nothing to do - there were no threats in the area in over 6 months. He suggested terminating, and possibly re-opening the testing session if the situation changed and there was a credible threat to the area. General Shepard reluctantly agreed, and authorized the shut down of the program. 2 days later, the operators were packing up, and everyone was doing their best to make the site look normal including removing the fencing and other signs of occupation.

Nancy needed Ron at home more and more as her pregnancy progressed, since she didn't have the energy to corral and contain 3 rambunctious toddlers any more. Maybe they should stop at 4 and forget about the basketball team, Nancy thought. She hoped Ron wouldn't mind getting snipped, so they could keep making love without the risk of additional pregnancies, she wasn't a spring chicken anymore, she was pushing 30!

The contractor overflowed the route where they wanted the high-tension line to go, and noted where the towers needed to go. He was glad that Allakaket Airlines had two helicopters that were capable of heavy precision lifts, since the terrain they had to cross was the most rugged they had ever installed high tension lines over. He located several good sites to drop towers, and they would only need minimal logging to clear the sites. He turned on his laptop, crunched the numbers in his spreadsheet, and presented BA with a quote for \$2.5 Million, not including the step-up and step-down transformers on each end. Ron was glad he had approved up to \$5 Million, because it looked like it was going to cost between 3 and 4 Million to complete. BA found 3 more 10MW steam turbines cheap. It seemed the Big power companies were consolidating and selling off the smaller power producers, since it was cheaper for them to run a 100MW steam turbine than buy power from the smaller producers who were using 10MW turbogenerators. They simply bought out the smaller producers, and added another 100MW turbine as needed. Since they were using geothermal heat to make steam instead of burning oil and coal, it was cost-efficient to run the 10MW turbines. With a total of 4 10MW turbogenerators, they were producing excess power, but had nowhere to send it. What they would do instead is run 4 during peak demand, and shut the 4th turbogenerator down when it wasn't needed. Since they weren't using boilers, shutting down and restarting turbogenerators weren't as big of a deal as it was for coal or oil fired generators.

Bear did a little number crunching himself. They had over a million gallons of stabilized diesel on hand for the diesel powered generators. He still had trucks, loaders and other equipment that used diesel, but the million gallons would last almost a year without having to run the generators. Instead of 1 flight a week to keep the diesel tanks topped off, they could reduce it to two or three flights per year. With the reduction in diesel fuel and flight operations costs, if gold remained stable, they would just about double their income. Since they had power to burn, he had an ingenious idea to get the ore out of the mine, and down the hill. He would use a bucket conveyor to lift it out of the mine, and use an aerial tramway to move it downhill. The tram cars moving down a 20% slope almost a mile long would spin a huge generator, which

would provide power to run the conveyor. It was almost like perpetual motion, except for the transmission and generation losses. What he was doing is called electromotive braking or regenerative braking. With all this extra power, he could expand the mine as well, generating even more income. He e-mailed that spreadsheet to BA, who revised his numbers based on Bear's revised estimates, and concluded that even at \$5 Million, the High-tension transmission line project would pay for itself in 5 years if the price of gold remained stable. Since his operation wasn't as dependent on diesel fuel, even if the fuel price went up temporarily, they had a year's supply on hand and could ride out a price increase. If the price of gold increased, they would hit their break-even point even quicker.

Two weeks after the contract was signed, men and materials started arriving in Allakaket. The helicopters were busy all day for weeks. When they had enough materials in place to start work, they cleared the sites, bored and blasted footings for the immense towers, assembled the towers, and lifted them into place using the choppers. The strangest operation was laying the cable, since a big reel of cable was suspended from the Chinook, and all it did was fly from tower to tower slowly as the cable unreeled. It was connected to the stand-off insulators by some very brave men on the towers. They spliced the wire together as needed, and soon they had all 3 lines strung from all the towers. They flew in the transformers, and erected the fences to protect the step-up and step-down transformers. A separate crew installed the 3 turbogenerators and the piping into the wells. To make things easier, the one turbogenerator was dedicated for power in town, and the other 3 were connected to the step-up transformer which boosted the voltage to 100KV. On the other end was a step-down transformer to step the power down to a more usable voltage. Once the turbines were brought up to speed and tested, they threw the switches, and Bear shut down the generators. Everyone at the mine cheered as the lights blinked signifying the switch-over.

Nancy delivered her 4th child David, on April 1st. Ron thought it was hysterically funny until Nancy informed him if he wanted to fool around any more he needed to make an appointment with the doctor and get fixed. Her meaning was clear, and Moose looked at Ron like "Better you than me Buddy!" Ron made an appointment in Anchorage, and flew there the next day, and flew home with an ice bag between his legs. BA wasn't sympathetic at all, and kidded Ron until he hinted that he might suggest to Sally that BA needed to get fixed too! BA shut up so fast that his jaws snapped.

Chapter 23 - Broken Arrow

Several weeks later, the Allakaket Controller was in the tower when he heard over the radio on GUARD “Mayday...Mayday!” Then complete silence. He knew somewhere fairly close by, an Aircraft had gone down. Half an hour later, Bear was awakened out of a great dream by his cell phone. It was General Shepard. “Bear, we have a Broken Arrow. I need you and Hunter to retrieve and disarm the weapons. An F-15 Strike Eagle on an Arctic Training flight went down near you. We located the beacon, and it’s in a wooded remote lake, and our nearest NEST team is TAD to DC for training. I hate to do this to you, but you and Hunter are the only qualified personnel nearby to affect a recovery. The bombs have a 12-hour failsafe, so you have about 11 hours to get over to Elmendorf, pick up your gear, fly back to the lake and retrieve the two B-61-11’s. Don’t worry about the pilot or the aircraft. If necessary, you will be involuntarily recalled.”

“General, I’ll volunteer, and I’m sure Hunter will too. We’ll need Ron to fly us to Elmendorf, and land us on the lake. A helicopter from Elmendorf would be too slow, and I’m pretty sure their bigger helicopters aren’t amphibians.”

“OK Bear, Ron’s cleared for Top Secret.”

Bear remembered that Ron was a qualified diver. He hated risking Ron’s life like this, but he wouldn’t be any safer in the plane on the lake if anything happened, and if he used Ron as a safety diver, he and Hunter could both work on securing the bombs.

“General, Ron Williams is a qualified diver, I know - I trained him. If we use him as a Safety Diver, Hunter and I can both work on retrieving the bombs.”

“Bear, I can’t endanger a civilian like that!”

“He’s no safer in his plane on the lake if anything happens, and if he can help underwater, it would speed things up, and might make the difference between success and a major disaster.”

“Agreed Bear, OK, I’ll call Elmendorf and have 3 sets of cold water diving gear ready to go.”

“Make sure they include a bunch of high-power underwater lights - it could be darn near zero visibility down there without lights.”

“OK, I’ll have 3 sets of cold water diving gear ready, the lights, and the recovery gear ready and waiting at Elmendorf. Good Luck and Godspeed!”

“See you later General, I hope!”

Bear called Ron and woke him up. “Ron, it’s Bear, We’ve got a National Emergency, and I need you to fly to Alaskan Survival ASAP and pick Hunter and me up! Oh, and make sure you’re wearing all the wool and poly pro clothing you own.”

“Bear What the Hell is going on?”

“Sorry Ron, not over an unsecured phone - you’ll have to trust me. Make sure you say bye to Nancy and the kids, just in case. Now get your butt up here as fast as you can.”

Ron went into panic mode, grabbed a wool sweater and pants, put on his polypro underwear and his woollies, then his jeans and a tee shirt. He grabbed his go-bag, kissed Nancy, hugged the kids, and was out the door so fast that the door didn’t close until he was in the driveway. He called the airport and told them to fire up his plane. 10 minutes later, he was in the plane with the turbines idling, and quickly preflighted the plane as he taxied toward the lake. He called for take-off clearance, and as soon as he got clearance, he was airborne flying as fast as he could to Alaskan Survival. Bear and Hunter were waiting with huge duffle bags at the water’s edge, and climbed aboard as soon as he had stopped, carefully maneuvering around the spinning props. They opened the passenger door, and as soon as it was closed, they told Ron to back up and get the heck out of there. He threw the props into full reverse, backed off the ramp into the lake, and hustled to the downwind end of the lake while Bear strapped himself into the co-pilot’s seat and put on the headset while Hunter secured their gear and strapped himself in. Ron did a max performance take-off, and Bear said “You need to fly to Elmendorf as fast as possible. An F-15E from the Alaskan Air Command in Fairbanks was flying a training route armed with two B-61-11’s. The controllers heard a Mayday on GUARD, and then nothing. The beacons went off an hour ago, and they located the source in a lake about 20 miles north of our survival school. The two bombs have a 12-hour failsafe to keep them from falling into enemy hands. The clock is ticking, and Hunter and I are the only people close enough to defuse it in time. You get to fly the plane and act as a safety diver while Hunter and I recover and defuse the bombs. Once they’re defused, they’re very safe.”

“You mean that in 12 hours Allakaket’s gonna get nuked?”

“No, the failsafe detonates the charges in such a way that the nuclear material can’t go critical, and scatters the material over a wide area, so it can’t be reused. The down side to that is it acts as a big radiological bomb, contaminating the area up to 1,000 years. Obviously, we’d rather find the bombs before the failsafes activate. Sorry about shanghaiing you, but 1) you’re a pilot with the fastest Amphibian around, 2) you’re a qualified diver, and 3) you’ve got a Top Secret Clearance.”

“Remind me to thank you later!”

A little over an hour later, Ron made a fast landing at Elmendorf, and was directed to an out-of-the-way part of the base by a follow-me truck. Several airmen quickly loaded the plane, and

refueled it, then they turned around and flew back to the lake. They landed on the lake, deployed the RHIB loaded with the dive gear next to the door on a short rope while they changed into their dry suits. Once they were good to go, Bear stepped out first, then Hunter, then Ron. Hunter started the outboard, and Bear was holding a locator to find the beacon. Once they were over the site, Bear turned to Ron with his Dead Serious face and said “Ron, things could go bad down there real fast. If I flip you the bird with both hands, you’re to get the heck out of here as fast as possible, without regard to us. Get aboard your plane, and get away from here as fast as possible. Stay low just in case, and head toward Allakaket. If this thing goes critical, you’ll have just enough time to evacuate your family and fly South to Fairbanks before the fallout reaches Allakaket. Your job here is to keep an eye on us, and watch our backs. If this weren’t a National Emergency, I’d never risk your life like this, but we have no choice, and I know you would never order one of your pilots to do something you wouldn’t do yourself.”

They quickly donned their tanks, and grabbed lights and buddy lines, and dove over the side. They followed the anchor line down to the bottom of the lake, 50 feet below, and attached the buddy line to the anchor line. Bear and Hunter then attached Ron to the other end of the rope, and attached themselves to Ron with additional buddy lines. Bear took the lead, and the 3 of them swam as gently as possible toward the wreck, their lights only illuminating 6 feet in front of them. The beacon locator led them directly to the plane, and then they had to search for the weapons. Ron remained with the plane, so Bear and Hunter spread out and started a grid search after they checked the wing pylons. An hour later, Bear located one bomb, and stuck a pinger on it and tied a float marker to it, so they could locate it again, and he helped Hunter locate the other one. Once they had pingers and floats on both bombs, Bear gave Ron the surface sign, so they reversed their steps and followed the anchor rope back up to the boat, and did a safety stop at 15 feet. Their tanks were low, so they all switched tanks, and then Bear grabbed a couple of lift bags, straps and shackles, and they dove back down to the wreck. Bear decided to disarm the failsafes above water instead of below since it was too murky to see. They quickly located the pingers, and attached the straps to the fins of the bombs, and inflated the lift bags using the attached CO2 canisters. They followed the bombs up, and when they reached the surface, Bear attached a floating collar around the nosecone so the bombs were high and dry with the correct access port facing up. Using the included tool kit, he took the panel off, then opened a sealed package containing the disarming procedure. An hour later, 1 bomb done, one to go. The second one went faster, and when they both were disarmed, Bear towed the bombs to shore, and told Ron “Get in your plane, and take your sat phone and call this number to request an extraction chopper for 2 repaired arrows and the repairmen. Whoever answers the line would know what to do, then fly home to Allakaket and tell no one, not even Nancy about this. Like they said in Men in Black - “It never happened” so make sure it stays that way.” Ron decided that now was as good a time as any to be a smart-alec, so he saluted and said “Aye, Aye Sir!” Bear would have tossed him into the lake if he weren’t baby sitting 2 nuclear bombs. Instead he growled “Get out of here!” Ron got back in his plane, and flew out of there.

Ron flew home, got changed, and didn’t tell anyone what happened.

2 weeks later, 2 big helicopters showed up painted in Allakaket Airlines colors and General Shepard stepped out with Bear in tow. Ron was tipped off by the tower and was there to meet him. "Ron, I came here to thank you in person. I was wondering what the Air Force could do to thank you for recovering those broken arrows. I knew you didn't need the money, and I can't award you any medals, since it never happened, so instead I decided to give Allakaket Airlines 2 brand new Sikorsky Helicopters. They're an interesting prototype built by Sikorsky Aircraft but never adopted by the military. If you notice, they closely resemble the S-76 Commercial VIP helicopter with 1 major difference." The General nodded to the pilot, and 2 pods motored out of the body into the slipstream. "One contains 2.75 inch rockets, and the other carries 4 Stinger missiles - They call it the "007" because no one knows it's an armed chopper until it's too late. I've permanently assigned these crews and aircraft to you, you're free to use them, but you can't sell them. The US Air Force will pay all the maintenance costs and fuel used on these choppers, just send us a bill." Ron walked over to the aircraft and noticed 8 very plush VIP seats. Then the General asked Ron if he wanted a ride. He didn't like riding in helicopters, but it wasn't a good idea to get in the habit of telling a General no. He called Nancy, said he'd be back in about 4 hours, then climbed aboard. The crew chief made sure everyone was safely fastened in, and they took off. The second chopper remained on the ground, and they flew back to Elmendorf. Ron was amazed at the ride; it was so much smoother than the other helicopter. In just under 3 hours, they were at Elmendorf. The pilot kept the rotors turning, and the General got out and boarded his VC-20 to fly back to MacDill. The pilot flew back to Allakaket after dropping Bear off at his place.

Chapter 24 - Belle of the Ball

The next time Ralph came over to Samantha's house, Doc and Bert were home. Doc took Ralph aside and told him that Doc had purchased 4 tickets to the annual Southern Plantation Ball at University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, and told Ralph that he hoped Ralph would ask Samantha to accompany him. Ralph was stunned, those tickets were hard to get and expensive. "Doc Richards, thank you very much sir."

"Ralph, if you two keep going the way you're going, I'm going to have a semi-son-in-law. I want to do whatever I can to encourage the two of you, since I'm sure you two are perfect for each other."

"Doc, it's going to be a while before there are any wedding bells in our future. Sam has to finish medical school, then her residency before we should get married."

"Why - even if she was married to you, I have an agreement with Sam to pay for her Medical School, and even if she's married, I'll still pay for it. I know how badly they underpay residents, and I'm sure you have huge student loan debts to pay off."

"That's very kind of you sir, but I don't know if I can accept."

"You still planning on doing a year in Louisiana?"

"Yes Sir!"

"I talked to the State of Louisiana, and if you do a year and set up the medical program there, they'll pay off your Student Loan debts."

"Doc, that's over 100 thousand dollars!"

"I know, I checked. I was going to pay it myself as a wedding present to you two, but since the state has volunteered to pay it, I can do something else for you two."

"Doc, I don't know what to say. No one has ever been this kind to me."

"Ralph, you make Sam happier than I've ever seen her. She is very thoroughly in love with you. If you can afford an apartment close to the hospital that is big enough for the two of you, I see no reason for you not to get married before she completes her internship."

"If I didn't have my student loan payments, I could easily afford a nice apartment close to the hospital."

“Now that we’ve got that settled, let’s meet the ladies. You and Sam will need to learn how to waltz, it’s a formal Ball, and the only dance they do is the waltz because of our Baptist roots. Luckily for you, Bert and I are old pros at the waltz, and we’d love to teach you two.”

“Merci Beaucoup Doc.”

They retired to the parlor, where Sam and Bert had cleared away the furniture, and had a CD playing waltz music. Ralph remembered hearing this music when he was a little kid, and it triggered some very happy memories. He was smiling when he walked up to Sam. She said “Hi Rafe, how you doing?” (Samantha was the only person he knew besides his mom that called him Rafe.) He smiled, and Sam gave him a big hug and a kiss. “I guess Doc told you we’re going to the ball.”

“Feriez-vous l'honneur de m'accompagner à la boule?”

“Je serais monsieur honoré!”

Doc interrupted “Sam, I’m glad you’re helping Ralph with his Cajun, but Bert and I don't parlent français.”

“Doc. Désolé.”

“I’m guessing you’re saying you’re sorry - so Ralph did you ask her yet?”

Ralph was laughing his head off, and decided to try it again in English.

Once they were finished, the dancing lessons started. 2 hours later, they were both good waltz dancers, and were gliding across the floor with no stepped toes or accidental collisions. Sam liked the idea of Ralph holding her close, but not too close. She just hoped she would be this graceful with a formal Southern gown on. Bert explained all the layers of fabric involved with a Southern Belle’s formal dress; she hoped the air conditioning worked in the ball room.

Two weeks later, it was the day of the Southern Plantation Ball. Doc Richards must have some serious pull, because he got both Ralph and Sam 3 days off with pay. Ralph showed up 3 hours before the start of the ball, like they had planned, and got dressed at Doc and Bert’s house. Doc showed him a spare bedroom which was bigger than his entire apartment with a bathroom that was bigger than his bedroom. His suit was hanging in the closet still in the dry cleaner’s packaging. He got undressed and took a shower, then got into his suit. His shoes were recently polished, and gleamed like crystal. An hour before the ball, Sam then Bert walked down the grand staircase, but all Ralph saw was Sam, she was radiantly beautiful, just as he imagined she’d look on their wedding day.

“Vous semblez enchanteur!”

Sam was thinking he didn't look too bad himself. She'd seen him in the Grey suit before, but something looked different. Maybe it was the look of love on his face. Sam knew right then and there that if Ralph asked her, she'd marry him in a heartbeat.

He offered his arm, and she took his elbow with her white gloved hands. Doc offered his arm to Bert as she reached the bottom of the staircase, and Nelson held the limousine door open. Sam couldn't figure out why, but Ralph appeared nervous to her. "Rafe, what's the matter?"

"Sorry Sam, I'm just looking forward to the Ball."

They talked on the trip in, and when they arrived at the ballroom, two liveried footmen opened the door of the limousine and helped everyone out. A doorman held the door, and the couples gave their tickets to another gentleman, who announced them as they entered the Grand Ballroom. They were escorted to their table then Doc and Ralph held the seats for Bert and Sam. Once everyone was seated, they started talking. Soon the music started, and the Master of Ceremonies announced that the Dance had started. Doc turned to Bert, and helped her out of her seat.

Ralph turned to Samantha, and asked her in his best Ret Butler imitation "Miss Stone, would you do me the honor of this dance?"

Playing Scarlet O'Hara to the hilt, Samantha fluttered her fan, then said "Why Mr. Lacombe, I would be delighted."

They giggled hysterically as he helped her out of her seat and escorted her to the dance floor. He carefully placed his right hand just below Sam's left shoulder blade with his elbow bent, Sam placed her left arm gently on top of his, and Ralph extended his left hand, and she placed her gloved hand in his, then they started dancing a box step in the Classic Waltz or Closed position. They danced through several songs this way. Finally Samantha indicated she needed to sit down. After he helped Samantha to her seat, he surreptitiously removed a box from his right pocket, knelt on his left knee, and held her hand in his.

"Samantha Dear, will you marry me?"

"Raphael Lacombe, I thought you'd never ask - Of course I will!"

Ralph opened the box, and she extended her left hand, and he slipped the ring on her finger. He must have had some help, because the ring fit perfectly. Right as he got up off his knee, Samantha came up off her chair and planted a lip-lock on him. Bert coughed discretely behind them, and there stood Doc and Bert. "Doc, Bert, Raphael just asked me to marry him!"

Doc said "We heard dear. Any idea when the wedding will be?"

Samantha looked to Ralph, who said “The Bride picks the date.”

Sam had less than 2 years to go, and Ralph still had his year in Louisiana to do. “How about 18 months from now, that will mean a June wedding, and Raphael should be back from Louisiana by then.”

“Works for me Samantha. I can come home once or twice a month on weekends to see you when I’m in Louisiana.”

“Rafe, you better get a cellular phone with a whole bunch of evening and weekend minutes that works were you’re going so you can call me at night!”

Doc and Bert were overjoyed, Samantha had finally found her man. Doc told them “Sam, Ralph, you two need to see Reverend Whitaker to reserve the date, and make appointments for marriage counseling.”

Since they had the next two days off, they could see Reverend Whitaker after Church Sunday. They spent the rest of the dance in each other’s arms. The rest of the evening was a blur to Ralph, since the only thing he remembered was looking into Sam’s face all night. She was glad Ralph was a good dancer, since she could tell his mind wasn’t on dancing. He just wanted to hold his fiancée

“Je t'aime tellement Samantha !”

“Merci vraiment monsieur!”

When the dance ended past midnight, Doc offered Raphael the spare bedroom for the night, since he was sure that they would want to spend Saturday together. Ralph thanked Doc, and was amazed when they got home to find a set of PJs that were his size sitting on the bed when he went to bed.

The next morning, Bert made breakfast for the 4 of them, and they were having an interesting conversation. “Rafe, what are we going to do about the wedding - I’ve got no family to speak of except Doc and Bert. I don’t even have someone to be my bridesmaid.”

“I’m in the same boat Sam, All my relatives are dead, and my Mother is in a nursing home with advanced Alzheimer’s, she doesn’t even recognize me any more. The nursing home doesn’t want me to visit her anymore, all it does is upset her, since she doesn’t know who that strange man is in her room.”

“I’m sorry Rafe. Do you know anyone at work?”

“Never got close to anyone. How about your friend Ron Williams?”

“We’d have to ask him. Doc, what do you think?”

“It would be poetic and romantic - after all if Ron hadn’t been a Christian Gentleman, Samantha would never had made it here.”

Samantha told Ralph the rest of the story from the beginning to the end. He really wanted to meet Ron - he didn’t know if he could spend a couple of weeks stranded with a beautiful woman like Samantha and keep his hands off her. Ralph understood why Ron was able to, because he believed it was wrong to have sex before marriage, and he agreed. He had a lot to thank Ron for. He saved her life at least twice, and then he sent her off the North Carolina instead of doing the selfish thing and keeping her there for himself. He knew that Ron was married with 4 kids, and he had an idea. “Sam, how about if Ron’s wife was your Matron of Honor?” Sam looked to Bert, who said “Don’t look at me - I’m the Mother of the Bride!” Sam had never met Nancy, but she was sure it would be OK, because she knew Ron would only marry someone who was as good as he was. Doc had their number in Allakaket, so Sam asked Doc to call Ron, and put the call on speaker phone. They retired to Doc’s library where the speaker phone was located.

“Ron, this is Doc.”

“Doc, how are you doing, everything OK?”

“Ron, I’ve got great news for you - Sam’s getting married in 18 months. They’re here in the office on speaker phone, and they have a favor to ask you. By the way, Sam’s fiancée’s name is Raphael Lacombe, he’s from Louisiana, and an ER Resident at the hospital here at Chapel Hill North Carolina.”

“Ron, it’s Ralph, I’ve never met you before, but we don’t have any close friends or family, so I wanted to ask if you and Nancy would be our Best Man and Matron of Honor.”

“Raphael, don’t take this the way it sounds, but why us?”

“Ok, here’s our thinking. You saved Sam’s life at least twice, and if it weren’t for you, she wouldn’t be here, so who better to stand in as a witness to our wedding. Sam has no relatives or close friends either, and since you would be flying here anyway to be in the wedding, we thought we could kill 2 birds with one stone and ask Nancy to be Sam’s Matron of Honor.”

“OK, I’ll have to ask Nancy - the wedding is in 18 months, so you don’t need an answer right now, right?”

Sam spoke up “Ron, we really want you there.”

“If it were up to me, I’d say yes, but I can’t speak for Nancy. What if we call you this

evening?”

“OK, Ron - if we’re not here please leave a message. Bye!”

“Sam, Ralph - before you say anything you might regret, remember Ron hasn’t seen you in almost 8 years, and Nancy has never met either of you. Give them some time.”

“Thanks Doc, that was good advice.”

“That’s what us old folks specialize in - giving advice.”

Ron talked to Nancy, and she surprised him by saying, “Ron, of course I’d be honored to be Samantha’s Matron of honor. Let’s leave the kids with Mom, they’ll be fine, and we’ll have a mini-vacation.” Ron called his Mom, and she agreed to take the 4 kids for a week. Ron called Doc, and told Sam and Ralph they would love to stand up for their wedding. Ralph wasn’t used to the Midwestern term, and asked “Did you mean you will be our Best Man and Matron of Honor?”

Ron replied “That’s what I said”, then started laughing when he realized exactly what he said. “Sorry Ralph, that’s a Midwestern colloquialism. Yes, we’d be honored. As soon as you set the date, let us know.”

Chapter 25 - Business is Booming

Ron talked to BA later that fall, and they were amazed at how much money Allakaket Airlines made. According to BA's spreadsheets, they were in the black to the tune of \$5 Million per year, and would pay off the new turbines and towers in under 5 years if everything remained stable. All their flights were booked all season, the Survival School's classes were booked solid, and the mine doubled their production using the geothermal electrical power instead of helicopters. The Oil and timber companies needed heavy lift, and the mines weren't using them as much, so Ron arranged a lease agreement that he thought was exorbitant, but the oil companies assured him was standard industry practice. He talked to Jim, the CH-47 pilot, who was reluctant to do it until Ron offered to double his salary for the duration of the lease agreement. Since his original salary was double what he made as a private contractor, Jim agreed. It meant being away from his family for a week at a time, but if the contract went as long as Ron expected it to, he could retire in 5 years or less, and just fly when he wanted to. The Super Stallion was leased to another company, and they offered to pay what Ron thought was an outlandish sum. Ron passed the increase on to the Super Stallion's pilots and crew. Ron needed the money like he needed another head. Even with the increased salaries, he was making 2-3 times what he made before by using the helicopters at the mine. Once a month, the Ch-47 flew diesel fuel to the mine, but other than that, the two heavy-lift helicopters were busy full time with the oil and timber companies. Since the S-76 helicopters were armed, and could carry 3300 pounds each, they took over the monthly gold transport run to Anchorage. The S-76's were much faster than the big heavy lift choppers, more maneuverable, armed, and had defensive flare and chaff pods installed. Ron was pleasantly surprised when he found out that the 2 Sikorsky helicopters could carry the whole load of gold between them, and were not only faster, but also used 1/3 of the fuel that the CH-47 used.

The 2 Sikorsky pilots liked flying the Gold Runs as they called them, since they got to practice their High Threat flying tactics. Normally flying what amounted to a civilian executive chopper was about as exciting as watching concrete harden, but the Gold Run was valuable enough that they treated it like a mission inside Indian Country, and flew a staggered formation, and never flew the same route twice. They flew high enough to give them time to react to a missile launch, and out of the range of most AA guns. Normally they flew nap of the earth down in the weeds in a high-threat area, but in this case, the ground was where the threat was, and the higher they flew, the safer they were.

Business in Allakaket itself was booming too, with 100% employment. Ron and BA kept the huge general store fully stocked, and charged far less than merchants in Anchorage did for the same goods, because they bought in huge quantities, and had a 10-year supply of non-perishable goods in stock in the huge warehouse. They had a multi-year supply of common OTC meds, and kept well stocked on perishables. While everyone else in the United States was practicing Just In Time inventory, their suppliers were scratching their heads with Allakaket General Store's ordering practices. They made a ton of money, so they kept filling their orders, and

gave them the best discount pricing available. BA realized that with as much ammo as they were going through for the range, they really needed an FFL to get the best prices for the quantities of ammo they were going through. So BA put in for the paperwork, and Allakaket General Store, a wholly-owned subsidiary of Allakaket Airlines, had an FFL, and bought ammo and firearms direct from the distributors. Ron almost fainted when he realized what the mark-up on firearms and ammo was. He told BA to sell the guns and ammo at just enough mark-up to cover their costs, including the storekeeper and warehouseman's salary, and any other miscellaneous costs. Within a week, word spread through Allakaket that you could buy ammo and guns at the General Store for 50% of what everyone else charged. Ron restricted the pricing to employees and families only by requiring an Employee ID to shop at the General Store. For the few people in Allakaket who didn't work for Allakaket Airlines or one of their subsidiaries, he issued a Residence card with the same privileges.

BA pointed out the lodges ordered huge quantities of supplies each year, and if he charged them a membership fee to cover costs, plus shipping via Allakaket Airlines, they could easily grab all the supply business for the surrounding lodges by offering much lower prices. BA suggested an annual membership fee of \$50.00, and reasonable shipping fees. The more Ron thought about it, the more he was interested in the idea. With the extra volume of the lodges, their buying volume would go up, and their cost per unit would go down. Also the delivery flights would add extra income even if it meant hiring 1 or 2 more pilots, and purchasing 2 more TurboGoose. He decided to call the 3 biggest lodges, and talk to the lodge managers. They had heard about the prices that the General Store was charging, and were definitely interested. They volunteered to pay \$100 per year plus shipping for the kind of pricing they could get for the quantities of supplies they could get. BA got back with their suppliers, and asked them point blank how much they would increase their discount if their volume went up 30%. Most said they would get an additional 10% discount in addition to their existing discount. BA asked them to put it in writing, and e-mail it to them. BA showed the quotes to Ron, and a spreadsheet showing what an additional 10% discount would do to their bottom line if they maintained their pricing, or dropped their pricing 5%. Realizing their pricing was already ridiculously low, he told BA to keep the 10% discount in reserve in case the lodges demanded an additional discount based on their volume. It turned out to be a smart move, since several of the larger lodges wanted a volume discount, so Ron offered all the lodges a sliding 5% discount based on volume. Ron got signed contracts from all the lodges in the area, and would start deliveries the start of next season. Ron told BA to go ahead and order the non-perishables with his next order, and the perishables just in time to have them in stock when the lodges ordered. BA realized that he needed to have the orders in hand before he ordered the perishables, since they had a shelf-life of maybe a week or two, and reminded Ron about that fact. Ron agreed, and told BA to do whatever he thought best.

BA crunched the numbers, then called Alaska Airlines to ask Brad if they wanted any more service from Fairbanks or Anchorage. Brad said if they could add 1 or 2 flights per week during peak, it would help immensely. BA told Brad he was planning on ordering another TurboGoose, and it would be used to deliver goods to the lodges, and when it wasn't making

deliveries, it would be available to Alaska Airlines as a fill-in plane. Brad said he'd e-mail BA a tentative schedule, and BA thanked Brad then hung up. BA called Ron, gave him the good news, then Ron called the Maintenance Chief at Vancouver BC, and had him check and see if they had another suitable Grumman Goose. He said he had 5 left, the RCAF had seen how well the TurboGoose worked, and recalled some of them, and installed the Allison turboprops in them. He said the Director of Allison Engines wanted to talk to him real bad, so Ron called him next.

"Gene, it's Ron Williams at Allakaket Airlines."

"Ron, just the person I wanted to talk to - the RCAF is ordering the turboprop we built for you in huge quantities, and might even get Grumman to build new airframes. We owe Allakaket Airlines a 10% finder's fee."

"Gene, I need two more turboprop engines - I'm having another TurboGoose built at Wing 19 of the RCAF base on Vancouver Island."

"Ron, that's great, your finder's fee just about equals our cost on 2 of those turboprops. How about I give you the engines instead of the fee?"

"Works for me. I'll have the Maintenance Chief get with you to coordinate the delivery schedule. I probably won't need any more TurboGoose for the near future, so if there are any more finder's fees due, a quarterly disbursement to Allakaket Airlines would be fine by us!"

"OK Ron, nice doing business with you."

Ron called the maintenance chief, and asked him to prep an airframe for him, and to expect a call from the director of Allison Engines. Ron told him that this plane would be configured in the flexible cargo/passenger configuration.

"Ron, you won't believe this, but the RCAF contacted Grumman and asked them to build a slightly larger version of the Goose with a tail ramp. They want to use it for SAR or Special Forces. They're talking about a fleet of 50-100 aircraft stationed across Canada. They're talking about promoting me, so this is the last plane I'll be able to build for you. Just as well, since we could only locate one airframe in the boneyard that was worth rebuilding. If you want the rest of the airframes for parts, let us know quick before they get shipped to the chop shop."

"How long do I have?"

"Maybe a week or two, they need the space for more aircraft."

"What kind of pricing can you give me?"

“If you can take them all off our hands, I’ll give them to you!”

“How much would you charge to strip all the useable parts off the airframes If I bought the lot. I could dispose of the airframes by dumping them in the ocean to form artificial reefs.”

“If you could get the permit to dump the frames, we’d charge you \$5,000 for the labor to strip the parts off the frames.”

“Deal - I’ll get back to you in a week if I can work the details.”

Ron contacted several people in the Governor’s office, and found out that if they could strip all military hardware including fuel tanks and hydraulics, they could dump the frames for free, the state would pay the transport costs. Ron told him the frames were in Vancouver BC. He said he’d have to get back to Ron, that added a complication. 2 days later, he called back and the guy said that they could do it, since the frames were scheduled for demolition anyway, and the Canadian Government didn’t want them. If he could get the frames to the port in Vancouver, they’d load them aboard a ship, and drop them in Alaskan waters where they’d do the most good. Ron called the maintenance chief back, and told him Alaska would take the stripped frames off them if they could deliver them to the dock. The chief said that they would have to transport them to the dock anyway, so they wouldn’t charge Ron for any transportation costs. Ron said if they could box up or palletize the parts to fit inside the TG, he’d pay them \$5k for the parts when he picked up the TG. He gave the maintenance chief the phone number of Ron’s contact at the Governor’s office, and told him to use his name.

A month later, Ron got a call from the RCAF maintenance chief, his TurboGoose was ready. Since his other pilots were busy, he said he’d pick it up personally tomorrow, and give them a check for the aircraft plus \$5K for the parts they pulled. He asked Nancy if she wanted to fly to Vancouver tomorrow, and she said she needed to stay with the kids, besides it was the wrong time of the month to try and join the Mile High Club. Ron thought Nancy was a mind reader, then realized the last 2 times they had flown that route they had joined the Mile High Club, and discovered that Nancy just had a good memory. Ron would bring a good book to read, and he had some paperwork to catch up on. The next day he flew down to Vancouver, and took his relief pilot with him so Ron could fly the new plane back. The long flight was tedious and boring without Nancy with him, even if they didn’t join the Mile High Club, he still loved to have her around. She was definitely much nicer to look at than his scruffy-looking relief pilot. Ron thought he should have a word with BA about grooming standards. Once they landed at Vancouver, Ron handed the maintenance Chief a check, and they distributed the load of parts between the 2 TG’s. Ron was glad they brought a spare plane, because that quantity of parts would be almost too much for 1 TG, not by weight, but volume. He read a mystery novel on his way back, and landed back in Allakaket just before dark, and asked the Maintenance crew to unload his plane, and store the parts. The other TG arrived 15 minutes later, and the crew was busy unloading parts. To free up the planes, they off-loaded the planes, and would inventory and stock the parts later.

Ron went home, gave Nancy a hug, and played with the kids. Jake and Josh were getting big, and Sarah was trying to walk. David was almost weaned, and Moose had his paws full trying to babysit the highly rambunctious toddlers. Once the kids were in bed, Ron and Nancy settled into bed for some “Quality Time”.

Chapter 26 - RCAF

A week later, Ron got a phone call. When he answered the phone, a Colonel Sandberg from the RCAF was asking for him. When he came on the line, the Colonel introduced himself.

“Ron Williams, Colonel Sandberg RCAF. May I have a minute of your time?”

“Yes Sir Colonel.”

“I’ve been talking to Maintenance Chief Nichols of the RCAF 19 Wing AMS, who told me you own the 8 Grumman Goose upgrades that are being flown by Allakaket Airlines.”

“Yes Sir, is there a problem?”

No Ron, nothing of the sort. It seems that you’ve stumbled onto an excellent idea, and the RCAF is looking into having Grumman build a modern version of the Goose with a ramp tail and Allison Turboprops. We’d like your expertise working as a consultant to the design team, since you’ve been flying them for the last couple of years, and could probably suggest a couple of improvements. Also, we wanted to borrow a TurboGoose if I remember correctly, that’s what you call the upgraded Goose, so we can study it. We would need a week or so in Vancouver. If you like, we’ll pay for a really nice hotel in Vancouver for you and your wife, and you can make a holiday of it. On top of your expenses, and let’s say a \$100,000 dollar consulting fee.”

“Colonel, I’ve got a couple of questions. I’m not familiar with Canadian firearms laws, but my wife and I have a Federal CCW issued by General Shepard at MacDill, and I wanted to be able to carry concealed in Canada during our stay.”

“Not a problem, I’ll call the head of the RCMP in Vancouver, and he’ll issue the appropriate licenses. Just use your Federal CCW for ID if anyone stops you, and the computer will show the appropriate Canadian clearances.”

“Great, also will my American Express card work OK in Canada?”

Colonel Sandberg was laughing his head off “Sorry about that Ron, yes, your American Express works perfectly. Prices might be in Canadian Dollars, but most shopkeepers are used to dealing with tourists, and will let you know what the price in US Dollars is.”

“Thanks Colonel, when do you need us?”

“Today’s Friday, how about Monday morning?”

“Would you mind if we flew in early, say Sunday Morning, could you put us up for another night?”

“Not a problem, being able to examine your TurboGoose and talk to you will save the Government Millions of dollars in R&D costs writing the specifications.”

“Ok, Colonel. We’ll be arriving Sunday afternoon at Wing 19, could you have a car waiting to transport us to the Hotel, and e-mail me a reservation for a nice hotel starting Sunday for as long as you think you’ll need us.”

Ron gave the RCAF Colonel his e-mail address, and 15 minutes later, a reservation for the Wedgewood Hotel in downtown Vancouver BC appeared in his e-mail. The payee was listed as Col. Sandberg RCAF, and was good for 9 days starting Sunday. Ron looked up the Wedgewood suite listed on the reservation, and it listed for over \$300 USD per night, not too shabby! He found Nancy and told her, then called his Mom, and asked her if she could come over early Sunday morning and babysit the kids for a week or so. Anne asked him what they were up to this time, so Ron told her the RCAF was thinking of buying an upgraded and modernized Goose from Grumman Aircraft, and they wanted him and Nancy in Vancouver for a week with a TurboGoose so they could check it out. They had already e-mailed a reservation at the Wedgewood Hotel in downtown Vancouver BC. Anne said she’d call Doc Miller, but she didn’t see any problem, since most of the time they sat there and waited for patients that never came. She could be there at 7:00am Sunday Morning. Ron said “See you then Mom, Love you!”

“Love you too son, bye!”

“Nancy, everything’s set, Mom will watch the kids for a week. We need to pack, and make sure you pack my suit and a nice dress for you - they dress up for dinner at this hotel!”

Nancy was glad that money wasn’t a problem, since she always wanted to shop in Vancouver. She hoped Ron would have a couple of extra days for sight-seeing, since the city was a sight-seeing extravaganza. She logged onto the internet and made a list of the things she wanted to see, and places she wanted to shop. She was hoping that they could make this a kind of second honeymoon, and this time actually make it out of the bedroom. Ron told her to pack her P-14 and make sure she had her CCW. She packed her DeSantis leather handbag with the gun holster built into a secret compartment. She knew the Canadian Government was fairly anti-gun, and wondered how Ron had arranged permits for them to go armed in Canada. “Must be nice to have connections”, she thought. She packed lightly for her, and only brought 3 suitcases. Ron had 1 suitcase and his garment bag containing his suit, ties, and shoes. Ron wondered why women always packed too many clothes. They spent the next couple of days spending as much time with the kids as possible, and Sunday morning came sooner than they expected. They made breakfast, fed the kids and the dog, and right as they finished, the doorbell rang. Ron noted approvingly that Anne only had 1 small suitcase. He decided that

mentioning that fact to Nancy wouldn't get him any brownie points, so he helped his mom get settled in her room. With the new room addition, and the 4 kids, they had enough room to give Anne her own room to stay in when she visited, and they left it arranged the way she liked it. Anne knew the kids' routine cold, so there was no need for long-winded instructions. They kissed the kids goodbye, gave Anne a hug and a kiss, loaded the truck, and drove to the airport.

His personal TurboGoose was already prepped and the turbines were idling when they pulled up. Ron thought he could get used to this, and climbed aboard. He was glad that Nancy was flying right seat again. He really missed her on his last couple of trips to Vancouver. He didn't bring up the subject of the Mile High Club, but secretly hoped she would. Between the two of them, they got the plane pre-flighted in record time, and Nancy entered the coordinates for the 19 Wing airfield in Vancouver BC into the Navigation computer while Ron got take-off clearance and set the plane up for take-off. By the time they reached the end of the lake, they were ready to fly, and Ron asked Nancy if she wanted to take-off. Her ear-to-ear grin told him everything, and he said "Copilot's plane". She shoved the throttles to the stops, and performed her first max-performance take-off. Once they were at 500 ft AGL, she pushed the nose slightly forward, and reduced the throttle settings to a more sedate climb, since they had a long way to go. She turned toward Vancouver; made sure the nav computer had the right coordinates, and activated the auto-pilot. She turned to Ron and said two words "Race You!" She was glad Ron had thought ahead and removed the seats. Ron understood why she had so many suitcases when she opened one and produced a Bear skin rug, then got undressed. A couple of hours later, Ron got up to check that they were still on course. The Nav computer said they still had 2 more hours to go, so he went back and joined Nancy on the bearskin rug.

"Nancy, I'm glad I didn't tease you about the extra suitcases."

Nancy decided that now would be a good time for a tickle fight. When they were finished, Ron looked at his watch, and realized they needed to get dressed; he needed to check in with Vancouver ATC in 15 minutes. He got dressed as quickly as he could, staggered into the pilot's seat, and put on his headset. "Allakaket Airlines calling Vancouver Control."

"Control, go ahead Allakaket."

"Entering outer boundary en route to Wing 19. Request vector and landing instructions."

"Roger Allakaket Airlines, wait one."

2 minutes later the controller came back on. "Allakaket Airlines, maintain heading and altitude until within 10 miles, then turn left to heading 85E and descend to 2,000 ft. At 1 mile descend to 500AGL and call approach."

"Roger Control, turn to 85E at 10 miles and descend to 2,000 ft. Descend to 500 at 1 mile and call approach."

“Confirmed Allakaket. Transferring to Wing 19 Controller, have a nice day.”

“Thanks Vancouver Control.”

It took Nancy a little longer to get dressed, and she sat in her seat right after Ron got off the air. Since the autopilot was still engaged, he leaned over and gave her a very passionate kiss. Nancy returned the favor, and 5 minutes later, Ron realized he had a plane to fly. He checked the nav computer, and they were still 20 minutes out. 10 minutes later, he turned off the autopilot, turned to 85 degrees east, and descended to 2,000 feet. He had 9 miles to loose 8,000 feet, so he pushed the nose over until he was satisfied with the rate of descent. At the 1-mile marker, he was at 500AGL, and called the tower as soon as he spotted the runway. “Wing 19, this is Allakaket Airlines on Final.”

“Roger, pattern is clear, come straight in. Follow the follow-me truck to parking spot when you reach the end of the runway.”

“Roger control”

Ron landed the plane, and taxied to the end of the runway where he was met by a “follow-me” truck. He followed it to a parking space near the 19 Wing AMS hangar. Chief Nichols was waiting for them, and there was a government sedan next to him with a driver. They unloaded the aircraft, and Chief Nichols shook both their hands, and told Ron to be back at the base at 0900 Monday, and handed him a pass to get back on the base. “The driver knows where the hotel is, and will meet you out front at 0830 sharp Monday morning.”

“Thanks Chief Nichols.”

They got into the sedan and drove to the hotel. It was even more elegant in person than the internet images. A bellhop took their bags, and they showed their reservation to the desk clerk, and they were treated like royalty. Another bell hop carried their bags up to the room, and turned around and left without waiting for a tip. Ron thought that was strange, but didn’t comment. Nancy said she needed a shower, and when she saw how big it was, she asked Ron if he wanted to join her. After taking the longest and most enjoyable shower in his life. Ron got dressed, and asked Nancy what she wanted to do with the rest of the afternoon, hopefully outside the bedroom. Nancy had a list, and picked the thing that she wanted to do the most, and thankfully it was open on Sunday. Stanley Park would be a great place to spend a Sunday afternoon. They called the front desk, and one of the Hotel vans would drop them off at Stanley Park, and could pick them up later that evening. For a nominal fee, they could take the Stanley park shuttle around the park, and get off at the various points of interest and back on all day.

They spent the day at the park, checking out the gardens, the miniature railroad, totem park, and the Variety Kids Farmland. Ron was in awe of what he saw at the park, since he had never seen most of these animals and plants up close and personal. Nancy realized they hadn’t bought a

camera, and they bought a disposable camera to get stuff on film. Ron decided after using the disposable that he'd rather have a full-featured camera with some serious capabilities. Ron had never seen a peacock before, and when it spread its tail feathers, Ron was stunned by its beauty, and took several pictures. Ron's stomach reminded him that it was time to eat, and someone suggested The Teahouse Restaurant, saying it was the most romantic restaurant in Stanley Park. It was also one of the more expensive, but Ron had his American Express Card. They ordered the mushrooms stuffed with crab, and skipped the entree since they were going to eat dinner at the Bacchus, which was the famous restaurant downstairs at the Wedgewood Hotel. They had dinner reservations for 6:00 and didn't want to ruin their appetite.

They spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around Stanley Park, and called it a day at 4:30 so they would have time to get back to the hotel, shower and change, and be downstairs for their 6:00 dinner reservation. The Stanley Park Shuttle dropped them off at the same point where the van picked them up, and it was sitting there waiting. The driver explained he drove a route all day back and forth, but it beat driving a cab. They got back to the hotel in plenty of time, and got a quick shower and got dressed for dinner. Ron wore a suit and tie, and Nancy wore a conservative dress. As soon as they came off the elevator, they walked maybe 10 steps to the door of the Bacchus. The Matre de asked for their name, and seated them a minute later at one of their choice tables. Nancy leaned over and told Ron "Nice table, trying to earn brownie points?"

Ron swore he had nothing to do with the seating assignment or the first class treatment they got at the hotel. Ron looked at the menu, and hoped the food was worth it. He'd never spent that much on a meal in his life! Ron ordered the Applewood Smoked Wild British Columbia Salmon appetizer, and Nancy ordered the Bacchus Tasting of Seafood appetizer, they both ordered the Wild Mushroom soup, Since Salmon and other fish were nothing new to Ron, they both ordered the Bacchus Duo of Lamb entrée which consisted of oven roasted rack of lamb with olive crust, peppered sirloin of lamb, boulangère potatoes, and garlic mint jus. The waiter recommended the house wine with dinner. Since neither of them were big drinkers, they ordered one glass of wine each. With all the different foods they were eating, the waiter suggested a mildly sweet Rose'. 5 minutes after their order was taken, the appetizers arrived. The service was nothing but fast. People must dine later around Vancouver, because they had the restaurant practically to themselves, which was OK with them. Ron thought the smoked Salmon was excellent, and took a sip of wine, which blended nicely with the fish, Nancy's Seafood wasn't what she expected, then she realized that it was a French Restaurant, which explained the sauce on the fish. She hoped the Lamb would be better.

Once they were finished, the waiter brought out the next course, and Ron really liked the wild mushroom soup. Nancy liked it too, but thought it was too bland for her taste, and when the waiter turned his back, she sprinkled some salt and pepper on it. Later when they finished the soup, the Lamb was ready. It was everything they expected, the rack was a prefect medium rare, the sirloin was tender, and the potatoes were crisp yet spicy. The Garlic Mint sauce was perfect on the lamb. Overall, they were pleased with dinner. The waiter gave them another

glass of wine with the check, on the house, and Ron pulled out his American Express, looked at the bill, added 20% to the bill for excellent service, and signed the receipt. The waiter was back in a minute with his card and his receipt. Ron thought he might be able to deduct this meal after all, since they were on a business trip, and Nancy was an officer in the company. Ron helped Nancy out of her chair, and they walked to the elevator, and up to their room. Ron discovered they had a balcony view, and Nancy joined him out there to enjoy the city lights.

“Ron thanks for everything. I had a wonderful day, just spending it with you. I know you’re going to be busy the rest of the week, and I have some shopping to do, but I’ll try and locate some nice places for dinner. Try and call me in the afternoon, and if I’m not in, please leave a message. I’ll try to be back to the hotel before 5:00 each day, so we can go to dinner somewhere.” Nancy gave Ron a big hug and a kiss, then said “Race You!”

Ron got up the next morning, and they ate breakfast in the restaurant. Ron almost choked at the prices, and thought “I wonder if there’s a Denny’s around here?” Since he was hungry, he ordered the Corned Beef, Mushroom and Potato hash for \$12.25. Nancy ordered the two-egg and ham omelette with hash browns and toast for \$12.50 - Ron thought that shopping must be hard work! He paid the bill when they were done eating, and kissed Nancy goodbye. The car and driver was waiting to take him to the base. Nancy got in a cab, and told the driver the shopping mall she wanted to go to first.

Ron talked to the driver on the way in, and there was a Denny’s just a block or two away from the hotel. He gave Ron directions to it in case they wanted to eat breakfast there from now on. Ron showed his pass at the gate, and was waved in. They drove right up to the AMS hangar, and Ron hadn’t seen that much brass in a long time. Chief Nichols introduced Ron around, and the Tech-reps from Northrop Grumman and Allison were both there, as well as several Aviation Design Engineers from NG, and an Engine Design Engineer from Allison. Colonel Sandberg was standing next to a 3-star General named Glasgow, who was in charge of the RCAF. With the introductions done, Colonel Sandberg walked Ron away from the crowd for a second. “Ron how do you like the hotel?”

“I love it, but I hope the Government can afford it?”

“It’s not costing the government a cent, my Grandparents own the hotel, and I comp senior RCAF officers there all the time. They write it off as donation to the government. What do you think of the Bacchus?”

“I love their dinners, but breakfast is a tad pricey.”

“Sorry Ron, I forgot to tell you, when we comp someone, not only is the room free, but food and a limited selection of wine. You can order anything on the menu for free.”

“I don’t want to take advantage of your hospitality.”

“You’re not, like I said the hotel writes the expenses off their taxes, just like you write your meals off your corporate taxes. All you need to do is write your room number on your receipt from now on. We include a gratuity in all bills, but if you feel the service was exceptional, you can authorize up to an additional 10%.”

“You do that on all your bills?”

Yes, why?”

“That waiter will be real glad to see us tonight; I tipped an extra 20% without knowing you’d already included the tip in the bill.”

“I wonder how many other Americans that has happened to, maybe we should include a note on the bill form that a 15% gratuity is already included.”

“Might not be a bad idea. Thanks for letting me know.”

Chief Nichols walked up to Ron. “Ron, I forgot to tell you, as part of the process of showing the engineers everything, we’ll have to remove a bunch of panels and replace them.”

“Chief, as long as your mechanics do the work in such a way so the aircraft is as good as new when she goes back together - go for it!”

Chief Nichols walked everyone over to Ron’s TurboGoose, and explained the history of the aircraft, and what they had done to it. He was constantly interrupted by the engineers with technical questions, some of which he deferred until later when they had the aircraft open and could show them. Once they were inside the aircraft, and the Grumman reps realized that the only things this aircraft had in common with a NG Goose was the airframe and the skin, they started paying attention and asking lots of questions. The thing that really amazed them were the engine mounts that allowed a larger turboprop engine to be mated to an aircraft designed for smaller radial Wasp engines. They were talking vectors, thrust, loads, etc. Finally Ron explained it in English. “Gentlemen, the way I see it, the original designers overbuilt the aircraft since they knew it could see combat. Civilian flying is much more sedate, so the plane never sees the loads on the airframe that it was designed for; Turboprops aren’t nearly as torquey as a radial piston engine, so the mounts don’t have to stand the huge torque values. Therefore it could handle a much bigger motor, and the mounts fit. The only torques on the system come from the propeller, and the same forces were present with the Wasp engines.”

General Glasgow was glad Ron was here, and was sure he would earn his fee; he could translate what the eggheads were saying into simple English sentences. Ron could tell the NG Engineers' favorite phrase must have been “What the Hell?”, because every time they showed them something new, they repeated it like a mantra.

After a long day of show and tell, NG said they could build the new plane for \$1.5 million a copy. Ron pointed out that his plane only cost \$250K each using a surplus frame, and it didn't cost $\frac{3}{4}$ of a million dollars to design and install a tail ramp. They huddled and came back with another idea. "If we can use off the shelf parts, and most of the existing NG frame section design, we could do it for \$750,000.00 per copy."

Ron spoke up, "Gentlemen, with all due respect, that's BS! Why not charge a fixed R&D cost for what it costs to design the new aircraft using as much of the original design as possible, then a per-plane cost to build them. If anyone else buys some of these planes, charge them a percentage of the R&D costs, and rebate it back to the RCAF."

The senior Tech Rep said "Mr. Williams, that's not the way it's done!"

"Sir, I've already bought 8 airframes and had them retrofitted. I'm sure there are a bunch of Goose airframes out there that could be remodeled and have the Allison engines installed. NG could lose this entire contract by being greedy - it's not worth half a mill per plane to get a loading ramp!"

The tech-reps said they would have to talk to their superiors, and they would get back to them tomorrow. With that the meeting adjourned early. General Glasgow took Ron aside, and said "Son, I like the way you negotiate - if you pull this off, you definitely earned your fee, and if not, you still earned it if we can locate all those airframes before Grumman does and scraps them so we can't rebuild them. I've got a few phone calls to make to make sure the US planes don't get scrapped. I've got it, I'll put a bid on them, which will pressure Grumman to play ball or lose the entire contract, because Allison doesn't care whom they sell engines to."

Once the General was finished, Col. Sandberg and Chief Nichols approached him. "Looks like we've got the rest of the day off. By the way, thanks - those guys have been ripping off the RCAF for decades."

"I just don't agree with the way they do business. Designing planes is a cost of doing business. They shouldn't be allowed to get away with highway robbery just because they're the only game in town. I'm halfway tempted to hire their engineers away from them and start my own company."

"Wouldn't work - they own all the politicians who make all the decisions."

Ron shook his head, he'd heard about the level of corruption in Military procurement, and now he had first hand knowledge of it. Those tech reps quoted \$1.5 Million per plane as if they expected to get it!

The General came back 5 minutes later with a huge grin on his face. "Ron, we did it! I called the bone yard in Arizona and locked up all the Grumman Goose Airframes they had for salvage

prices. When Grumman gets wind of this, they'll have to play ball, because like you pointed out, it's not worth \$500 thousand just to get a loading ramp!" Ron saw the General had a cell phone and asked to borrow it. He called the Hotel, and left a message since Nancy was out. He handed the cell phone back to the General, and told Chief Nichols "The wife's out shopping, so I've got the rest of the afternoon free until 4:00pm, any suggestions?"

Chief Nichols suggested they retire to the Base Pub. He said they had a bunch of dartboards, and he could teach Ron to throw darts. Their favorite game was Cricket. Ron said "After you!" and they all piled into the General's vehicle. Within an hour, Chief Nichols was swearing that Ron was sandbagging them when he said he never played before. He could put all 3 darts in the triple ring regularly enough to beat the club champion half the time. Finally the General got curious and asked Ron what his vision was.

"The last time it was tested it was 20/17."

The General knew that his best pilots were also excellent dart throwers, but the best dart throwers were his sharpshooters.

"Ron, you done any real long-distance shooting?"

"Sorry General, but I can't talk about that. But I can tell you if you want to know, you need to ask General Shepard."

Everyone with the exception of Chief Nichols either knew or knew of General Shepard at JSOC. They realized that Ron was involved in a Classified Project, and couldn't talk about it. Since he didn't mention whether he shot long-distance, it probably involved long-distance shooting. Col. Sandberg knew that Ron had a Federal CCW, and they were very difficult to get, so whatever he was doing was classified enough that the Air Force thought he needed to be armed at all times.

Ron used the club phone to call at 4:00 and Nancy was back from shopping. Ron asked her if she could make another reservation at Bacchus for 6:00 that night, and he'd explain later. He asked Chief Nichols if the car and driver were handy, since he needed to go home. General Glasgow volunteered to drive Ron home since he was staying at the Wedgewood Hotel as well. He could drive him back as well in the morning. Ron accepted, since he decided that he liked the General, and he was one of the good guys. The only thing the general drank all afternoon in the Club was either Soda or Coffee, so he was sober as a judge. Ron shook hands with Chief Nichols and Col. Sandberg, and left with the General. Once they were in his car, the General told Ron that he and General Shepard went way back.

"Ok General, then you know I can't talk about the project without prior clearance."

"Understood, if I need to ask you anything classified, I'll get General Shepard's permission via

e-mail.”

“I’m glad you understand General.”

They drove quietly to the hotel parking lot, and the General said that he’d see Ron at 0830 tomorrow unless he called first. Ron gave him his room number so he could call, then they said goodbye. Ron took the elevator to the 15th floor, and knocked on the door, then inserted his card into the electronic lock. There was a pile of stuff in the corner that wasn’t there before, and Nancy was lying dressed on the bed, taking a quick nap. Ron joined her, and gave her a quick kiss. Around 5:00 they got up took showers and got dressed for dinner. Ron felt better about dinner tonight since he wasn’t paying for it. On the way down, Ron explained to Nancy that the room, meals, and drinks were comped by the hotel, since Col. Sandberg’s grandparents owned the hotel, and wrote the bill off as donations to the government. She felt much better ordering the food she wanted, and ordered the Spice Roasted Atlantic Lobster Tail appetizer. Ron ordered the lobster tail too. They both ordered the mushroom soup, and the lamb. Ron had never eaten lamb before and was pretty sure he wouldn’t get the opportunity again. 10 minutes after they ordered, the lobster tail was brought out, along with a half-carafe of the house Rose’. Ron didn’t order the wine, but remembered he wasn’t paying for it anyway, so he poured Nancy a glass, then himself. When they finished the lobster tail, the plates were cleared, and the soup brought out. This time Nancy thought the soup was much better, and didn’t need to season it. Finally their rack of lamb was brought out. Good thing they didn’t eat lunch, or they wouldn’t have been able to eat the lamb. After dinner, Ron signed his receipt exactly as Col. Sandberg had told him to, by writing his room number on the bill. 2 minutes later, the waiter and the Matre de were at their table. The Matre de’s manner bordered on groveling. “Excuse me, Mr. Williams. Last night we didn’t know you were guests of the hotel, and your bill was comped by Colonel Sandberg. If you wish, we can issue a credit card refund.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything about it because I didn’t know until today the entire bill was comped. If you wish to issue a refund, I’ll accept it, but let me give the waiter a \$20 tip for his excellent service last night, and his honesty for pointing it out to you.”

“Sir, there is already a 15% gratuity built into the bill.”

“Yes, I know, but honesty like that should be rewarded. Could you issue a refund less the \$20 tip instead of trying to exchange US dollars for Canadian dollars?”

“Yes sir, I can do that if you wish.”

“Thank you.”

2 minutes later, a credit receipt for last night’s bill, less the \$20 tip Ron had authorized was presented to them. Ron stood, helped Nancy out of her seat, and walked out of the restaurant door. The Matre de held the door, still bowing and scraping. When they got up to their room,

they couldn't stand it any longer, and laughed themselves silly. The "Royal Treatment" they were getting was a bit over the top.

They ate breakfast in the hotel restaurant the next morning, and Ron met General Glasgow at his car at 0830. He handed Ron a faxed copy of a letter authorizing Ron to discuss the details of the project with General Glasgow RCAF. Ron handed the copy back to the general, since the note in of itself was classified, and he had no means to dispose of it properly. He explained the Barretts project and the Robo-Gun project to the general on the drive in. The general was really impressed. He also understood why Ron kicked everyone's butts at darts. His vision and eye-hand coordination was on par with his best pilots and sharpshooters. He was intrigued by the Bradley project, since the Canadian Military used the Bradley as well. Ron told him that he'd have to ask General Shepard about the details, since he was only involved in the T&E project. When he told the General how accurate the new gun was, he knew that the Canadian Military would want to order a bunch as well, if the Americans made it available to them. Canada had a sweet deal with American military suppliers that allowed them to buy the same equipment as the US Military instead of the export version like Mexico had to. He hoped that they would extend the agreement to include the new and improved Bradley. He was having difficulty imagining a vehicle that could take out lightly armored vehicles at over 2 miles that was mobile and capable of rapidly engaging targets out to a mile, or out to ½ a mile while moving. As soon as they were finished, he had to get hold of General Shepard and get the details. This was even more important that the Goose project.

When they got to the AMS hangar, Chief Nichols was waiting for them. "General, good news - Northrop Grumman Aircraft agreed to our terms. They said it would cost between 1 and 2 million in R&D costs, and each plane would cost \$500,000.00 including a tail ramp and the Allison engines." The general thought this was a good idea, since they were only going to order 100 planes. Their original quote of \$1.5 Million per copy would mean a cost of \$150 Million for 100 copies. Their revised quote of \$750 thousand per copy meant a cost of \$75 million for 100 copies. Their latest quote of \$500,000.00 each plus \$2 Million in R&D costs dropped the price for 100 planes to \$52 million or less than 2/3 the cost of their previous quote. Word of their purchase of the airframes must have made them re-think their position. The best part was it only cost the Canadian Government \$100,000.00 to purchase over 200 Grumman Goose airframes at scrap prices. That was the best \$100,000.00 he had ever spent, since it saved the Government over \$23 million. The engineers wanted to take a closer look at Ron's TurboGoose, and take measurements. They would need the plane for the rest of the week, but wouldn't need Ron after today. Ron suggested the RCAF contact hospitals in Alaska and Canada that used Life Flight, and advise them of the new aircraft. He personally knew of a hospital in Anchorage would buy 2 of them at that price. The General's aide was taking notes like crazy, if even half the hospitals in Canada and Alaska ordered the new Goose, the RCAF could recoup most of their R&D costs with rebates from other purchasers. The General thought Ron was a gold mine of information. He had already saved the Canadian Government 30 some odd million dollars, now his advice was going to save them even more, and make NG happy with a larger order. Also his information about the new Bradley would be worth its weight in

gold if it panned out. Later that afternoon, the engineers had asked Ron all the questions they needed answered, mostly about flight performance, landing and take-off speeds, and other technical stuff. They almost had puppies when Ron explained how good the plane's STOL capability was with the new reversible-pitch turboprops. His reported minimum waterborne landing length was $\frac{1}{4}$ of what the listed minimum landing length of the original Goose, and his minimum take-off was half of the minimum listed take-off. His rate of climb figures had to be exaggerated, but Chief Nichols vouched for the rate of climb, since he was flying right seat during the original tests they flew before Ron took possession of the rebuild TurboGoose. They actually got even better rates of climb in testing, but they were very lightly loaded, with a quarter tank of JP-5. The Allison engineer said "Wait a minute; we designed that engine for JP-4!"

Chief Nichols explained that JP-4 was rarely available, and JP-5 was practically identical and safer since it had a higher flashpoint in storage due to additives the Navy added to the fuel. The engineer agreed that JP-5 would work just fine when he checked his laptop computer. Once they were finished with Ron, he called the hotel, and Nancy had just gotten back from shopping "Nancy, I've got the rest of the week off. They need the plane for the rest of the week, so we can go sightseeing. Can you book a reservation at the restaurant tonight, and we'll go sightseeing tomorrow." Colonel Sandberg overheard him, and asked him if they wanted to use the hotel limousine for the rest of the week. The hotel owned a fleet of limousines for driving VIP's around, and he knew that only half of them were busy since it wasn't the peak of the tourist season. Ron thought the limousine was too much, but it sure beat cabs, so he agreed. General Glasgow drove him back to the hotel, since he was finished as well, and was going to fly home tomorrow.

Chapter 27 - The Goose is Loose

They spent the rest of the week in Vancouver shopping and sightseeing. One of Ron's first purchases was a very good digital camera. He liked the idea of not having to develop film, since he was a 4-hour plane ride from the nearest photo shop. Nancy found a Ritz Camera shop at the first mall she stopped at the other day, and spent an hour with the owner comparing cameras. When he learned they lived in Rural Alaska, and were computer savvy, he suggested a fully digital camera. Even though they were more expensive, he recommended the Minolta Dimage Z1 or Z2. The Z1 was older, and about \$100 cheaper, but the Z2 had a better lens, and higher resolution. She brought Ron back the next day when he was finished working, and he decided that the Z2 was worth the extra money. He got the 512MB memory card, 2 sets of NiMh batteries, and a speed charger. The camera included the case, cable to connect to his computer, and in case the 512MB memory card ever went bad, the store owner included the 64MB memory card instead of retaining it like he normally did. He had a set of 4 NiMh AA batteries fully charged just in case they came back, and installed the 1st set in the camera, and packaged the second set with the charger. He told Ron that even in Fine mode; the 512MB chip would hold as many images as he could shoot over a week easily. Ron debated buying a tripod, since it was just something else to carry. The owner showed him a lightweight aluminum tripod with a fluid head and pistol grip that was the same price as some of his other tripods. He explained the benefits of a fluid head and the pistol grip, then showed Ron how he could hang the camera case from the yoke of the tripod to make it act like a much heavier tripod. Then he threw in the kicker - he'd include a \$30.00 cable release with the tripod that would totally eliminate camera shake on long exposures, and with a 25 foot cable, would allow him to get in the shot without using the self-timer. That sold Ron, so he bought the whole shooting match. The owner told him his total was \$700.00 USD. Ron handed him his American Express card, and was the proud owner of a camera that was smarter than he was, at least that's what he told Nancy on the way home.

He spent the rest of the afternoon reading the owner's manual, and charging the other set of batteries. The next day, Ron suggested they re-visit the Stanley Park, since he wanted to get pictures of some stuff there with his digital camera. Ron was amazed at how light the camera and case was, and Nancy volunteered to carry the tripod. When they got back to the hotel that night, she swore that Ron took a picture of every flower in the garden. Ron laughed and said he thought he might have missed a few of them. After dinner, they relaxed and planned what they wanted to do the next day. Nancy mentioned a Planetarium and a few other sights she wanted to see. Ron asked Nancy if she was interested in walking on a famous suspension bridge that was 150 feet in the air. Nancy said she would take a pass, since she was afraid of heights. Ron looked at her funny, and she explained that it was different inside an airplane, since you were enclosed instead of out in the open. It wasn't the height that scared her, it was a fear of falling.

That evening when they came back from sightseeing there was a note from General Glasgow that the RCAF signed a contract for 100 of the new upgraded NG Goose they were calling The

SuperGoose to differentiate it from Ron's creation, the TurboGoose. Ron called the number on the message card, and General Glasgow was effusive in his praise. Not only did NG Aircraft sign the contract for 100 SuperGoose aircraft at \$500,000.00 each, they reduced the R&D cost to \$1 Million when they received orders for an additional 100 SuperGoose from Life Flight companies across Alaska and Canada, and the lower 48. Some of the northern tier states had spots that only a STOL Amphibian could get into, and they wanted the SuperGoose for SAR and Medevac. He told Ron that the Canadian Government would offer him a choice of the first SuperGoose produced, or a check for \$500,000.00. Knowing that the first SuperGoose produced would be a collector's item some day, he took the SuperGoose. General Glasgow said that it would take 6 months to a year to start producing production SuperGoose planes, and that NG might be interested in him doing a T&E on the aircraft. Ron was tempted to say no, he wasn't a test pilot, and told the General so. He reassured Ron that the plane would be thoroughly tested before they let a civilian behind the controls, and they just wanted to make sure that Ron was happy with the flight characteristics, and that it measured up to his TurboGoose. Ron thought that would be fun, so he told the General if NG needed or wanted him to do a T&E on the final prototype, he'd do it for them.

Finally, they were finished with Ron's TurboGoose, and the RCAF not only put the TurboGoose back together better than they found it, they also performed the scheduled maintenance on the plane's airframe and turbines while they had it apart, saving Ron at least \$10,000.00 that the FAA inspection cost. It wasn't due for another 90 days, but since they had it apart already, it was no extra labor to inspect it while it was apart. What they found surprised them. The airframe was in as good a shape as when it was rebuilt several years ago, and the turbines looked practically brand new. Chief Nichols thought that whoever was doing the routine maintenance on that airplane knew what they were doing, and was a stickler for details. Chief Nichols told Ron the plane was ready, and they checked out of the hotel the next morning, and received a limousine ride to the RCAF airbase, and a ride in Chief Nichols' Hummer to the TurboGoose. Ron did a walk around, and there wasn't a spot of oil or dirt visible anywhere on the fuselage. The fuel tanks were full, including the APO unit. Ron thanked Chief Nichols, and they boarded the aircraft, started the turbines, and preflighted the plane. Once everything was good to go, they called the tower, received permission to take off, and taxied to the runway. Ron took the controls this time, and they were winging home to Allakaket. They skipped the Mile High Club this time, and just talked for the whole flight home. Nancy was amazed that the RCAF would put them up in a swanky hotel for a week and pay them \$600,000.00 on top of if for a few days work. Ron told her the joke about the guy that hit the machine with a hammer and billed the company \$5,000 dollars as an explanation. "This company had a generator that wouldn't work, and everyone told them to call this guy who really knew his stuff. Finally in desperation, they called him. He drove out, took out a hammer, and tapped the generator, which started running like a top. They were very upset when he sent them a bill for \$5,000 for the repair, after all he had only been there a minute. They told him they wanted an itemized bill, so he sent one that read "Hitting generator with hammer - \$1.00. Knowing where to hit generator with hammer - \$4,999.00" They paid the bill."

Nancy got it; they weren't paying Ron for his time but his knowledge.

When they got home and unpacked it was late enough that Anne decided to stay over. She didn't like driving, and hated driving at night. Ron was too tired to drive her home. After saying hi to the kids, Ron went into his office, and hooked the camera up to the USB port of the computer. He was glad this computer had a front USB port. He downloaded the images into his photo editor and sorted through them, then cropped, tweaked and edited them; finally he had a folder on his computer he wanted to show Anne and Nancy. He converted the file to a slideshow, and called everyone into the room. Once everyone was seated and quiet, he said "This is where Mom and Dad have been all week" for the benefit of Josh and Jake. Sarah may or may not have understood, and David was still an infant. Anne smiled at Ron's "Daddy" comment. Ron clicked the "Start" icon and the slide show started. He had set them up for a 30-second interval, so it took 10 minutes for all the images to go through. Josh and Jake wanted to see it again, but Sarah was bored, so Nancy took Sarah and David into the play room downstairs to entertain themselves with Moose. After 2 more loops through, Josh and Jake had seen enough too, and joined their siblings and Moose. Ron had installed a hidden video camera in the play room, so the adults could monitor things, and act as referee if necessary without interfering unnecessarily. The whole house was wired with video monitors, including the driveway and the back yard, which both had day/night cameras. There was a video monitor in the kitchen which switched from camera to camera every 10 seconds unless you typed in a code to freeze it on one camera, or told it to ignore a camera. Ron didn't bother with the VCR option since he wasn't using the system for security, but to keep an eye on the kids, and have some warning if guests were arriving. Later Anne and Nancy both told Ron the pictures were excellent, and he should make prints from them, so he searched the internet for a printer designed to print digital images up to 8x10.

Meanwhile, back in North Carolina, Ralph had completed his residency, and was fluent in Cajun again. He had received permission from the Director of the Residency program to take a year and set up a medical clinic for the Cajun families in the bayou. The State of Louisiana loaned him a 4x4 Jeep and a large flat-bottom john boat with a 100 horsepower motor. Both vehicles had radios sufficiently powerful to reach the local Emergency Hospital in case he had a Medical Emergency while he was out in the bayou. They leased a small office with a one-room studio apartment above it right on the border of the bayou. The Office said Medical Clinic in English and Cajun with Cadeusas. He had office hours in the morning from 7:00 to noon, then made house calls from 12:00 to 5:00. He expanded further and further into the bayou, and met relatives he didn't know he had, and they improved his vocabulary of Cajun phrases which he entered into his English-Cajun dictionary he kept in his PDA. Doc Richards made sure he got a good cell phone with free long distance to talk to Samantha at night when he got back from his house calls. His first couple of visits to a new family were interesting to say the least. Most had never even seen a doctor in their lives, and it took a while to gain their trust. He started small, bandaging cuts and scrapes, and finally when he gained their trust, started administering childhood vaccines, and giving antibiotics to patients with infections, after explaining that they had to take the entire prescription, since it wouldn't work if they stopped taking the medicine.

when they felt better. With his family background and expertise in Cajun, the people of the bayou trusted him, and soon he spent all his time in the field, and the State moved other French-speaking doctors into the region. He set up a crash course in Cajun dialect, so they could understand and be understood by the local bayou people. Within a year, he had a successful program running, and it was time to return to North Carolina and Samantha. His greatest reward besides being able to help all his relatives in the bayou was a letter from the State of Louisiana telling him his entire Guaranteed Student Loan debt had been retired. He made 3 copies of the letter, and sent 1 to Doc, 1 to Bert, and 1 to Sam, all Certified to make sure that there was a copy besides his just in case.

When Ralph got back, there was only 6 months left before their wedding, so he checked with the Residency program director about working at the hospital. Since they desperately needed trained ER docs, they hired him through a temporary service at almost twice what the hospital paid, but he got no benefits. He stuck the extra money in his savings account since he was going to need the money for a honeymoon, and moving expenses. While he was in Louisiana, both he and Samantha had applied to several hospitals in the Atlanta area. They had both been accepted at Grady Memorial Hospital, which was a Level-1 Trauma Center. Ralph had been hired as the assistant Chief Resident, since the hospital operated 24/7 they had to have 2 Chief Residents so one was always at the hospital. They also accepted Samantha into their Emergency Surgery Residency program as a brand-new Emergency Surgeon. While Ralph was gone, she accelerated her schedule to complete her training, and got everything signed off in 12 months that normally took 18. Ralph made it back in time to see her graduate Medical School. She was now Doctor Stone, soon to be Doctor Lacombe. Doc Richards thought that would drive the Admin people at Grady Memorial nuts. Since their first initials were different, the hospital decided to use their first initial and their last names on hospital documents, since they were moving to Atlanta after the wedding. Sam and Ralph scheduled their Marriage Counseling sessions with Reverend Whitaker on Ralph's off days. Sam was working at the hospital as well through the same temporary agency that they hired Ralph through. One funny result of all the time Ralph spent in Louisiana was most of the marriage counseling session was conducted in Cajun. Anyone walking by Reverend Whitaker's office would have thought he'd been kidnapped by French Terrorists, since very few words in English were spoken. Reverend Whitaker was eager to use his native dialect again, so every time they came over to his office, they only spoke Cajun.

6 months after they first flew to Vancouver, Ron got an e-mail asking him to fly to LAX, where he'd be met by a Northrop/Grumman representative, and choppered to an undisclosed location where he would do a week-long T&E session with the new plane. Round-trip tickets would be waiting for him at the Alaska Airlines counter in Anchorage tomorrow. His flight was at 0900. Ron told Nancy that Northrop Grumman wanted him in California tomorrow to test their new SuperGoose, he thought he would be gone a week. He'd ask the relief pilot to fly him to Anchorage since he needed to be there earlier than their scheduled flight. Ron made a few phone calls, and found out that the relief pilot was flying to Anchorage tomorrow to pick up cargo. He called the relief pilot, whose name was Steve, and told him he needed to be in

Anchorage at 0800 tomorrow, so he'd either have to reschedule the delivery driver or cool his heels in Anchorage for a couple of hours, since he couldn't justify taking a TG out of service for a week just to fly him to Anchorage. Steve said he'd take care of it, and asked Ron if he could be at the airport at 0600. Ron asked him if he minded flying as pilot in command, since he wasn't sure if he'd be awake enough at 0630 to fly the left seat. Steve laughed and said that he used to love "Dawn Patrol" when he flew C-130's in the Air Force, so Ron could rest easy. Ron packed his bags, making sure he had his P-14 and 2 spare mags, his Federal CCW, and a week's worth of clothes. He set an alarm for 0500 and went to bed early. Nancy made muffins before she went to bed, loaded and programmed the coffee maker for 0500, and left a large thermos next to the coffeemaker.

Ron got up, took a quick shower got dressed, grabbed a bag of bran muffins, filled his thermos full of coffee, grabbed his suitcase, and was out the door by 0545. He made the airport by 0558, and climbed in the co-pilot's seat, stowed his bags, and they were airborne by 0600. They were on the ground in Anchorage at 0745. Steve thanked Ron for the coffee and the muffins, and dropped him off as close to the terminal as he could. Ron had his Federal CCW out when he approached Security, and showed it to the TSA goon, and was waved around the metal detectors with his baggage in hand. He picked up his ticket at the Alaska Airlines counter, saw the ticket was first class to LAX with 1 brief stop in SeaTac to take on passengers. He surrendered his checked luggage, walked back through security with his carry on, and headed to the gate. At 0845, they started pre-boarding first class, so he took the opportunity to pre-board. The Alaska Airlines employee recognized his name, and put a gold star on his boarding pass, indicating he was a VIP in case the stewards didn't recognize his name. The first class seats were more comfortable than his lounge at home, so he took a novel out of his carry-on he had wanted to read for a long time. He was a big fan of Tom Clancy, but rarely had time to read, so he brought *Bear and the Dragon* since it was almost a 6-hour flight including the stop in Seattle. Right at 0900, they pushed away from the gate, and the plane was only half-full. Once they were airborne, the steward asked him what he wanted, and Ron asked for Orange juice and a muffin. He came back with a platter of muffins and croissants, and a pitcher of Orange juice. Ron selected 2 muffins from the tray, and got a glass of orange juice that was better quality than what he drank at home. A couple of hours later, they landed at SeaTac. The pilot was pretty good, and they landed with barely a bump, and he held his attitude all the way in. "Probably military trained" Ron thought. 45 minutes later, they were airborne again, headed to LAX. The Steward asked Ron if he wanted anything. He still had a muffin left, so he got a refill of the orange juice, and a headset to listen to the radio programming. He found a good fusion jazz program, so he decided to listen to it. Several hours later, they turned on final for LAX. Ron took off his headset, put up his book, and got ready for landing. He hoped whoever was going to meet him would be right outside baggage claim. After landing, he was one of the first people off the plane, and headed toward baggage claim, retrieved his suitcase, then saw a liveried Chauffeur with a sign held chest high that said "Ron Williams." He cleared the claim check area, and walked over to the driver. "I'm Ron Williams."

"This way sir."

He took Ron's baggage, led Ron outside, opened the door of his limousine, put the baggage in the trunk, and then got in and drove to a nearby heliport. They were headed to a big SA-80 with NOTHROP GRUMMAN stenciled on the side. The driver parked the limousine a safe distance away from the helicopter, and when Ron got out, the driver reminded Ron to keep his head down between there and the chopper door. Ron walked carefully to the helicopter, which had its rotors turning. The driver was right behind him with his luggage. The crew chief showed him to a VIP seat in the front of the passenger area, and helped him secure the belts, then stowed his luggage. He pulled the door closed, locked it, and took his jump seat right behind the pilots, and tapped the pilot on the shoulder, who took off like an express elevator. Moments later, they landed at a rooftop heliport, and the door opened, and another gentleman in a suit got on board. He was buckled into the seat next to Ron's. Once the door was secured the noise level dropped to the point that they could have a normal conversation without shouting. The chopper took off and headed east. The guy next to Ron stuck out his hand and said, "Ron Williams, I'm Jack Snyder, the program director for the SuperGoose project. Let me tell you, I don't know how you came up with it, but the TurboGoose was one heck of a good idea. Allison has built some slightly more powerful turboprops than the ones they sold you, and we stretched the frame 6 feet, added a rear ramp, and converted it to a twin boom tail to make room for the wide ramp door. The modifications added almost 100 cubic feet of cargo space, added 30 knots to its top speed, and from what we can tell by our preliminary flight testing, reduced the landing and take-off lengths slightly. You're going to love this plane when you see it. It's stashed at Edwards right now, but we wanted you and the test pilot to fly it back to El Segundo, then use Sepulveda Reservoir for smooth water landing and take-off tests. We already did the rough water landing and take-off tests, and we were amazed that it could safely land in 6-foot swells. Of course, it was at a nose-up attitude of almost 20 degrees, but it worked. I wouldn't recommend landing in anything greater than 3-4 foot swells unless it's an emergency."

Several hours later, they landed in a remote corner of Edwards AFB, far away from the highly classified areas. Ron was stunned when he saw the SuperGoose. It was significantly bigger than the TurboGoose, but not enough to look like a totally different plane. From the nose to the cargo door, it looked exactly like his TurboGoose. From the Cargo door back, it looked like a miniature C-130. The Test pilot was standing there, so Ron walked up and introduced himself. "Hi, I'm Ron Williams."

"Mr. Williams, I've heard a lot about you - this was a good idea you had, this is one sweet flying turboprop. Sorry, my name is Keith Northrop. I'm Jack's great-grandson, but don't let that intimidate you, I'm just a test pilot here. Let me show you the SuperGoose."

An hour later, they were ready to fly. Ron's baggage was put aboard the SuperGoose, since their final destination was the El Segundo plant, and a limousine would take him to the hotel when they were finished. Keith talked Ron through the pre-flight. For this series Ron elected to fly right seat since he was the student on the new plane, and Keith was doing a full plane-familiarization check-ride before Ron would fly left seat. Ron noticed the plane's avionics were identical to the ones in his plane, except newer but cheaper models. He decided then and there

if they were going to build him a SuperGoose, he was going to request a bunch of avionics upgrades even if he had to pay for them. Ron commented on the avionics, and Keith told him that was their standard avionics and instrumentation package. Ron asked how much an upgraded avionics package would cost, and rattled off several upgrades he'd like to see. Keith stopped him, took out his microcassette recorder, and asked Ron to repeat himself, this was stuff the home office definitely wanted to know about. Ron repeated himself, and Keith nodded and agreed. When they were finished, Keith slipped the cassette recorder back in his pocket, but Ron noticed he didn't hear a click that would indicate he turned it off. Ron would be careful about what he said from here on out. They got the plane ready to fly, and soon they were airborne and westbound. 5 minutes later, Keith started asking leading questions about the negotiating process. Ron was vague and non-committal. Finally he asked Keith to turn off the recorder. Once it was off, and Ron was sure it was off, he said "Ok, what's up? You've been asking me leading questions about the negotiation process. I'm not going to get entrapped by a simple recorder, and I wouldn't put it past you to have the plane bugged as well. If you're not here to test the plane, let's go home, and I'm going back to Alaska."

Keith reached over, and flipped a switch under the dash. "Sorry, Legal put me up to it, they were pissed that we lost 35 million dollars in revenue when you opened your mouth." Once Keith started talking, Ron surreptitiously started his microcassette recorder, two could play that game! Keith kept talking "Normally, we charge a 100% markup over our costs, then tack on a lot of fees. By the time we're through, we've made a 300-400 percent profit margin."

"And the Government lets you get away with it?"

"Sort of, the politicians get half of it back in kickbacks, campaign contributions, and stuff like that. It makes me sick, and I'm just about to chuck it all, and go back to being a private pilot."

They kept talking for the rest of the flight, and finally they were over the reservoir. Keith made the first two approaches, but he was too conservative. When Ron got a feel for the aircraft, he asked Keith if he could take the next one. He cranked the flaps and slats all the way out, slowed to 50 knots, and floated down to the lake like he was on a parachute. He touched down with a slight splash, then reversed the props and stopped on a dime. Ron looked over, and Keith's eyes were as big as saucers. "How'd you do that?"

"I've been a bush pilot in Alaska since I was 14. You have to land like that to land on the smaller lakes. I've made hundreds of approaches that had a 200 foot obstruction within a mile of the landing zone."

"You floated in like you were on a parachute."

"That's basically what you're doing, at the last second, you push the nose forward and land conventionally. You've got to be really aware of your height above the lake, because if you flatten out too soon, you crash, too late you crash."

“Ron you must have 5-pound brass ones!”

“Not really Keith, anyone that wants to fly bush in Alaska has to be able to do it, because some of the lakes we land on are more like ponds. Also we do that at near maximum load too.”

“I hate to say it, but you guys are nuts - give me a big long concrete runway any day!”

“Keith, this plane was designed to do exactly what I just did - there’s not much point in having an amphibian in Alaska or Canada if it can’t land on a postage stamp. This plane had great STOL characteristics. Now with the tail ramp and high mounted tail and rudder surfaces, it will be even better. Check this out!”

Ron turned into the wind, shoved the throttles to full, and did a max-performance take-off. Keith looked at the altimeter and his watch, they were climbing at over 2500 feet per minute!

“Ron, you realize you’ve exceeded the design spec for rate of climb by 500 feet per minute?”

“That wasn’t even the fastest the plane will climb. In an emergency, I can trade airspeed for altitude and manage almost 3,000 feet per minute for a short duration.”

“Yeah, and if you keep it up too long, you stall and crash.”

“Beats flying into a mountain or a grove of trees near the lake.”

“You’ve got a point there. OK, let’s head for home.”

Ron relinquished the controls, and Keith flew a perfect concrete runway approach to the Northrop Grumman private airstrip at El Segundo. He taxied next to a limousine and shut down. “Ron, the driver will take you to the hotel, and pick you up at 0800 tomorrow. The room and your meals have already been paid for by Northrop Grumman. All you have to do is write your room number on your bill for dinner tonight and breakfast tomorrow. See you at 0900 tomorrow, I want someone else to witness your short-field water landing, because they’ll never believe me if I tell them.”

Ron climbed out of the co-pilot’s seat, went back to retrieve his bags, and when he was out of sight for a minute, pocketed the microcassette recorder in his pants pocket after turning it off. The driver drove him to a nearby Sheraton hotel that was OK, but not in the same league as the Wedgewood in Vancouver. He asked the desk clerk if he could send something FedEx overnight to Alaska. The clerk explained they couldn’t guarantee the overnight delivery, but Ron knew that all overnight packages received special handling, and didn’t sit in depots waiting for a truck. It was worth the extra security with the tape he was FedExing to BA. The information on the tape was enough to indict several high-ranking Northrop Grumman executives for various federal crimes. It was his ace in the hole in case he ever needed it.

Chapter 28 - Testing...

The next day Ron was driven back to the El Segundo facility at 0800. He had a fresh tape in the microcassette recorder, and the switch was set on VOX. It was a super-long, super-slow tape recorder that could record 6 hours per side. In VOX mode, it would last even longer. He listened to the tape last night before he shipped it FedEx to BA, and Keith's voice came through loud and clear. He was very grateful that BA had told him about the microcassette recorder trick. They were ubiquitous since everyone used them to record notes or meetings. The long-play VOX machines also had a major benefit called CYA. If someone tried to set you up and you had them on tape attempting to entrap you - they went to jail - not you. Ron routinely recorded both sides of all calls on Allakaket Airlines phones for CYA reasons as well. Ron would never use them for blackmail purposes, but they could help the company out of a jam if someone promised something over the phone then reneged on it, if you had them promising to do what they were supposed to on tape, it was very hard to refute. When he got to the El Segundo Northrop Grumman facility, Keith was there as well as Jack Snyder. Keith explained that they were going to do the waterborne short-field landing and take-off again. The mechanics had installed a removable crew chief seat in the cabin doorway so Jack could see the instruments on approach and verify Ron's airspeed on landing, and how much runway he needed to stop on water. Ron explained to Jack that landing like this could be scary, and if Jack had a weak heart, he shouldn't go up. Jack told Ron that he was a roller coaster fan and made several trips to Magic Mountain each year.

Ron and Keith both did a careful walk-around, and then preflighted the plane. Jack climbed into the crew chief's seat, and Keith radioed for take-off clearance. He handled the takeoff, and it was a textbook runway takeoff, long and boring. Once they were over the lake, Keith and Jack double checked their seat belts, and Ron checked his, then Ron took control of the plane, dropped down to 500 feet AGL and slowed to 50 knots while he cranked the flaps and slats all the way out. Once he was at 50 knots, he floated over the edge of the lake with the turbines idling, and maintaining a 15-20 degree nose-up attitude, he floated right down to the lake, and right before touchdown, flattened out his flare by pushing the nose forward. They landed with no more of a jar than an express elevator stopping, and as soon as they were down, Ron flipped the reverse switch, and set both throttles at 30% power, and they stopped like someone had thrown out an anchor. Jack was shaking his head. There was no way that this plane could land like that - it was just too big. The sat bobbing on the lake while Ron and Keith explained it to Jack. The conversation got really technical, then Ron said "It's just like landing with a parachute. If you give a big high-wing plane just enough airspeed to keep from stalling, and you maintain a nose-up attitude for a high angle of attack, with the flaps and slats increasing lift and drag, you can land much slower. The slower you land, the less runway you need to land. When we touched down, I used the reversible pitch props to stop us by reversing the pitch and setting the throttles at 30%. The C-130 has reversible pitch props, and can generate enough thrust to taxi backward at 30 mph with the props reversed. The SuperGoose doesn't have that much power, but it greatly decreases the Short landing length if used properly." Ron taxied to

the end of the lake and asked Jack if he would like to see a short-field max performance take-off. When he nodded his head, Ron threw both throttles to the max, and when the airspeed indicator read 80 knots, he pulled back sharply on the yoke, and held a 20-degree angle of attack until they were at 2,000 feet, just under a minute later. Jack was impressed! When he stabilized the plane at 2,000 feet, he turned to Jack and said “Any Questions?” and Jack started laughing since Ron had nailed the line perfectly. “Ron, I’m glad Keith asked me along for this run, because if I hadn’t seen it myself, I’d never believe it, and I’m still not sure about what happened. Obviously in the hands of a skilled bush pilot, this plane has a tremendous STOL capability.”

“Jack, most of my pilots at Allakaket Airlines are ex-military C-130 pilots, and they only needed a couple of trial runs to get the hang of the STOL techniques, since they’re more aggressive than the approaches a regular C-130 can fly. But this plane is 1/3 the size of a C-130 with almost half the horsepower. With a better power to weight ratio, it can do amazing things. Fully loaded, it can fly a pretty good approach, but I wouldn’t try a take-off like the one I just did fully loaded, so the pilot has a lot to think about. He might be able to land on a postage stamp full loaded, but probably won’t be able to take off again. In that case you have 1 or 2 options, off-load before you take off again, or don’t land so heavy in the first place. I can remember landing an overloaded DeHaviland Otter on a postage stamp, grateful that I didn’t have to take off again with that load.”

Ron turned to Keith and asked him if there was any other tests that needed doing. Jack answered the question for him. “Frankly Ron, we were allowing a week for the STOL testing, we weren’t expecting you to go out and do it the first day flying, or this aggressively. This is still a prototype plane.”

“I guessed that if Jack Northrop’s great grandson was flying the plane, it would be safe, since the owners of the company wouldn’t unnecessarily risk his life.”

“You’ve got a point there. Anyway, you definitely earned your fee, and I’ll have the airline change your booking so you can fly home today.”

Ron asked Jack “While we’re up here, is there any tests we need to do in the testing protocol?”

“We need to do angle of attack and stall tests, but we’re not set up for them, they need to wire the plane for instrumentation. The best thing is to set it back down at El Segundo so they can wire the plane, and I’ll fly the rest of the test program.”

Ron called “Pilot’s plane” and Keith said “I’ve got it.” Then they turned to land at El Segundo. Once on the ground, Jack told Ron that the driver would drive him to the hotel to retrieve his bags. If they hurried they could get him on the afternoon flight to Anchorage. He handed Ron a check for \$100,000 dollars, and shook Ron’s hand saying “thanks, you earned it!” Ron said “You’re welcome, if you have any questions, feel free to e-mail or call me” and he handed Jack

his Allakaket Airlines card with all his contact information. Ron practically ran to the limousine, he was in a hurry. He told the driver to get him to the hotel and step on it, then keep the motor running, he'd be down in 5 minutes. The driver said that Northrop had already taken care of everything, all he had to do was drop off his key in the drop box on his way out. 5 minutes later, they arrived at the Sheraton. Ron walked quickly through the lobby, took the elevator up to his floor, grabbed his bags, looked around to make sure he didn't leave anything, and hurried back down to the limo, dropping his card in the drop box on the way by. The Clerk grabbed him, handed him a message from BA which read "Watch your back" and it was signed BA. Ron was glad that he had the microcassette recorder running in his pocket, and his P-14 still in his IWB holster with 2 spares. Since he was in a hurry, he kept his baggage with him, and got into the limo. It took a while to get to LAX due to the traffic, and Ron thought "I'm being paranoid, but am I paranoid enough?" and started rummaging through his stuff to see if anyone planted anything on him. Luckily there weren't any little bags full of white powder, so if they were going to try anything, it wasn't going to be as simple as planting drugs on him. He started praying, because the way his mind was roaming was freaking him out. Finally he started reciting the 23rd Psalm to himself, and he calmed right down.

Half an hour later they arrived at LAX, and the Chauffeur must have done this before, because he pulled right into a reserved VIP unloading area, and opened the doors, Ron climbed out without help, grabbed his bags, and told the Chauffeur, "Thanks, but I'm in a hurry, I'll take it from here." The skycap took his baggage, and gave him a claim ticket. Ron told him that they had a changed reservation waiting for him at the ticket counter, so the skycap gave him back his bag, and offered a cart to take it to the ticket counter. Ron went through the VIP line, and was served a minute later. They did have a first-class return ticket waiting for him, so he switched his old return ticket for a new one, and they took his checked luggage right there. He had less than an hour before the plane left, so he had them issue a boarding pass instead, and he walked through security. He showed his Federal CCW to the TSA goon, who escorted him around the security gate, and told him "have a nice day" and he was in. Ron's level of anxiety dropped significantly now that he was on this side of the security gate, and probably the only armed person around except for Federal Agents. 10 minutes after he reached the gate, they announced pre-boarding for first class, so he took advantage of it. This time Alaska Airlines had a VIP code already on his boarding pass, and they didn't need the gold star. He boarded the aircraft and was seated in the plush first class section. He was glad to be aboard the aircraft, but would feel better after the plane took off. 15 minutes later, they closed the cabin door, and the tractor pushed the plane back. It taxied and was airborne a minute later. Ron could feel his spirit soaring with the plane. Whatever BA was worried about wasn't going to happen in LA. Next time he flew commercial, he vowed to pack more survival gear in his carry-on, since the Federal CCW seemed to be a talisman to the TSA goons, and they didn't even check his carry-on.

Ron decided to put together a mini-kit that wouldn't take up a lot of space in his carry on, and could be carried in an oversized shaving kit bag so it looked harmless if anyone checked. Since he wasn't using his GPS anymore, he'd load the entire US topo and road map into it as well as 2 spare sets of batteries, a small first aid kit, a SAK, or better yet a Gerber Multiplier. He liked

the 800 series with the replaceable jigsaw blades the best. He had a Nite Eyez kit that could carry the Gerber Multiplier, a Mini-mag AAA Solitaire, an Eze-lap sharpener, a ferrochromium rod and striker, fishing line and hooks on a piece of cardboard, and a ranger compass. When it wasn't in his kit, the Nite-eyeز could be carried on his belt. A couple of contractor bags, a Mylar blanket, Ziploc gallon bags, and a bottle of Polar Pure would complete the kit. Ron knew that most people who flew commercial couldn't ever carry nail clippers on them, but since he seemed to have a free pass aboard the plane, he might as well take advantage of it. Just because he felt badly for his fellow passengers didn't mean he wanted to be in the same boat as them if something happened while he was away from home. While he was at it, he thought he should add several 1oz. Canadian Maple Leafs to the kit. 5 or 6 should be plenty. He always had at least \$100 dollars in small bills on him, as well as the American Express and a rarely-used Visa card for those that didn't accept American Express. Both cards had basically unlimited lines of credit available.

Ron never wanted to fly commercial again, but he knew he might not have a choice in the matter. He was so preoccupied with his mental checklist, that before he knew it, the pilot announced they were landing in Seattle. Since he was staying aboard, he didn't need to do anything, just wait for the passengers to tromp in and out of the plane. He was grateful he didn't take an isle seat, because several tall men in isle seats were getting whacked in the back of the head by women's purses and bags. Ron wondered why no one was seated next to him, because there were several coach passengers they could have upgraded. Ron didn't understand that with a VIP tag on his boarding pass, the only way they'd seat someone next to him was if they had paid full price for the First Class seat. The plane quickly emptied and filled up again, then the door closed and the plane was pushed back to the taxiway. A couple of minutes later, they were airborne. Ron realized he was coming home several days early, so he used his Amex card to use the Skyphone and call home. He told BA his flight number and the ETA to Anchorage. BA said that they'd make sure he got a ride home, and to meet the plane at the Allakaket Airlines gate since a scheduled flight from Anchorage to Allakaket would be leaving within an hour after his ETA. BA said he would hold the plane, and if it was full, he could fly right seat.

The flight arrived right on time, and Ron walked out to the boarding desk, told the Agent he was taking Allakaket Airlines flight number 14 to Allakaket in less than an hour, and asked her to intercept his bags, and re-route them to Allakaket Airlines. The Agent said "Who do you think you are, Ron Williams?"

"Read the Boarding pass Tammy."

"Oh my God!"

"Not exactly, now could you please get my bags intercepted, here's the claim ticket. They're holding the plane for me, so please expedite the request."

“Yes Mr. Williams!”

Ron got the gate number from Tammy to Allakaket Flight number 14, and hurried to the gate. As he was walking down the ramp to the tarmac, he saw a baggage handling truck with it's lights flashing charge up to the plane, stop with the brakes smoking, and transfer 2 bags that Ron was sure were his, because they were both monogrammed R.W., and had the Allakaket Airlines logo embroidered on them. Ron remembered a line from a Mel Brooks movie, and started laughing, thinking “It's good to be the King!” The ground agent directed Ron to the co-pilot's hatch. Steve was flying this flight too - so Ron said “Long time no see Steve!”

“Good to have you back Boss. The plane's already prepped and we're good to go.”

“Steve, I'm just taking the seat, I'm too tired to fly as co-pilot.”

“Good thing I ate my Wheaties this morning!”

“Just get me home in one piece Steve, or Nancy might get mad!”

Steve's mental image of Nancy hunting him down and killing him made him swallow reflexively, then he realized Ron was teasing him back. Steve called for clearance while the tug pushed him away from his parking spot, then he taxied to the runway. By the time he arrived at the runway, he was clear to take off. He made a nice sedate take-off, and was soon cruising at 2,000 feet. They landed uneventfully in Allakaket 2 hours later. Ron drove home, opened the door, and said “Hi honey I'm home!”

“Good thing I sent the cable guy packing over an hour ago!”

Nancy gave Ron a big hug, and a bigger kiss. Ron hoped the kids could take care of themselves for a couple of hours, because he couldn't wait either.